

Chapter 1 – A Rainy Day in the Park

For as far back as he could remember, he hadn't been loved.

For as far back as he could remember, people tended to avoid him.

And for as far back as he could remember, he was beaten.

Sitting alone under a rather large, brightly-colored, wooden construct in the park, Harry Potter drew up his knees to his chest. After being hit about earlier in the day, he had fled from Number Four, Privet Drive in a desperate attempt to escape for good. He wasn't sure where he could go or what he would do once there... but anywhere was better than his aunt and uncle's house.

All he had done was to not be precisely on time with lunch. And because of that, his uncle had grabbed a hold of his shoulders, shaking him violently. After that, he was punched in the right shoulder – somewhere that didn't house an important organ. Somewhere that wouldn't leave any permanent damage. His uncle had been abusing him for as long as

Harry could remember...and all he wanted was freedom.

He had gotten as far as the park before the rain had set in. So he now sat, huddled up, waiting for the rain to pass. The storm had lowered the temperature considerably. And with the sun just beginning to set, it was only going to get worse. Harry wasn't particularly looking forward to sleeping underneath a play toy. But he knew that if he went back to Number Four, a worse beating would await him due to his missing dinner.

His clothing was oversized and rather tattered. Dudley had once told him that he looked like a street rat right out of Oliver Twist. Harry wasn't quite sure what he meant, but he knew he looked rather shabby. His clothes once belonged to his cousin. Despite being many years old, they only just began to fit onto Harry's dangerously-thin frame. The shirt was torn on one arm at the shoulder - Dudley had tried grabbing him to beat him up one day, but he had gotten free. His pants were faded and only came down to the tops of his ankles.

His shoes were older than the jeans and only barely held themselves together. Harry was quite sure that the toe of his left shoe would come undone any day. And his hair, which had never been straight and manageable, was worse than ever. He knew there was a fair bit of dirt in it due to Dudley pinning him to the ground while he had been trying to work on his aunt's flower garden. And even if his hair hadn't been filthy, it never stayed down, anyway.

Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and lowered his head to them. All he wanted was for the Dursley's to treat him fairly. Just once. He only knew what they told him, which wasn't much. His aunt had said once that they found him as a baby, lying on their doorstep. A few days after his parents had been killed. From what his aunt had told him, a gang of hoodlums had broken into his parents' house and killed both his mother and father. Harry couldn't even remember their faces.

Drawing in a ragged breath, Harry squeezed his eyes closed and tried to will himself not to cry. He had learned early on not to show any signs of weakness. Especially not while in the presence of any of the Dursley's. He hated crying because he knew he was made of tougher stuff than that. But when you're 11, wearing raggedy clothing, and huddled up, alone in the park... one's mind tends to forget things.

Harry wasn't exactly sure when he had fallen asleep. He awoke the next morning on his side, still curled up. His eyes were still sore – making him assume that he hadn't been asleep for very long. A few spiders crawled about under the construct, stopping occasionally to look over at him. Harry liked spiders, though he wasn't quite sure why. Being stuck under the stairs in a cupboard for as far back as he could recall, however, made it difficult to make friends. So he made due with the spiders that came into his makeshift bedroom. Oftentimes, he would secret the spiders outside before one of the Dursley's noticed. He hated seeing the spiders getting squashed.

Pulling himself up into a sitting position, Harry found he had to sniffle hard to keep his nose from running. He wiped it against his sleeve, anyway, and rubbed at his eyes. His back hurt from the position he had slept in... and his side was sore from sleeping on the odd gravel mixture that they filled the play area with. It was meant to keep

children from hurting themselves when they fell. It didn't make for a very good bed, though.

His breath was shaky when he drew it in. He wasn't sure whether the Dursley's had bothered searching for him or not. He guessed they hadn't wasted their time or effort. He would probably get beaten within an inch of his life if he returned now, though. He had missed preparing two meals for them now. Given how large his cousin and uncle were, that was as good as committing murder to them.

Frowning, Harry got the distinct impression that he was being watched. It wasn't the first time this had happened. He would often find himself outside when a chill ran down his spine. But every time he turned around to look, he was met with nothing but scenery. This time, however, turned out to be differently. Looking up and out the small crawlspace that let into his hiding place, he saw the cause for his paranoia.

A young girl, looking to be about his own age, was sitting back on her legs, watching him. She had cropped, blonde hair that looked to be ever-so-spiked up. She was wearing blue-jeans and a white blouse that looked entirely out of place on her. While Harry wouldn't say that she looked more like a boy than he did, she came mighty close. Her eyes were a piercing shade of blue, and she didn't seem to blink much, which didn't help the odd feeling Harry was getting.

"Wotcher!" She said, smiling at him. "Was wonderin' if you'd ever wake up... what'd'ja do, fall asleep in the park?"

Harry felt nervous. He rarely talked to anyone outside of the Dursley's. They didn't let him go to the public school that Dudley went to, due to the fact that he didn't have anything good enough to wear. And, as his aunt had once said, they weren't going to go 'showing him off' to the neighbors. His socializing skills, as a result, had suffered greatly.

"Um... hi..." He offered, his throat scratchy from the previous night. "Y..Yeah, I guess I did..."

The girl tilted her head. "C'mon out. S'kinda dark in there, don'tcha think? Not raining anymore... s'actually a nice day."

She scooted back and got to her feet. To complete the already tomboyish look, she wore black boots. Wondering who the girl was and, in all honesty, why he had never seen her around before, Harry started to crawl out. His relatives didn't like him being in the house when he wasn't doing chores...so he was left to his own devices most of the time. He spent a good deal of it walking about or playing in the park.

Harry winced as he stood up. It was ungodly bright out, with not a cloud in the sky. His legs ached from being curled up for the better part of the night, as well. Once his vision had adjusted, he looked at the girl, who had her hands in her pockets and was still staring at him strangely.

The two stood in silence for a few minutes, neither breaking the eye contact that had been made. Harry's instincts were, for whatever reason, trying to make him run. There was something about the way he was being looked at that didn't sit well with him. For this reason, he certainly wasn't expecting the girl to remove her right hand from her pocket, hold it out, and grin. "Well, now that I know you're alive an' can talk... you wanna be friends?"

Harry tilted his head and stared at the girl as if she had just sprouted a second head. His lack of a proper schooling had also left him without any friends. And any he saw out on his walks, he avoided. Mostly due to fear that Dudley would beat them up if he saw them with him. And Harry certainly didn't want to get this odd girl hurt. Licking his dried-out lips, he took a step back, bumping into the wooden object he had slept under. "I...I don't think that's a very good idea...my...my cousin would probably try to hit you or something."

The girl frowned, then slowly looked him over. The look of confusion only grew as she did so, as if she were looking at him for the very first time. "Hey, whatchu dressed like that for, eh? Y'look terrible!"

"I just spent all night under THIS thing..." Harry said, feeling a bit irritated now. "Was I supposed to come out in a tuxedo with my hair all done up...?"

The girl scratched her cheek, pursing her lips together. "Well... I just thought... well, you KNOW!" She said, speaking in a rather hushed tone, as if telling a secret.

"Nn...no, I'm afraid I don't know..." Harry said, squirming slightly.

"Whatcha mean you don't know?" The girl asked, brow creasing further. "You ARE Harry Potter, aren'tcha?"

Harry blinked. "How d'you know my name?" He asked.

The girl slapped a hand over her mouth and made a faint squeaking noise. "I...I um... heard you talking in your sleep..." She offered feebly.

Harry was about to tell her that he -never- spoke in his sleep when an older woman came around the corner and into the park. She looked around for a moment before spotting Harry and the girl. Her lips pursed much like the girl's had, moments before, as she started to walk over.

"Oh no, mum's found me." The girl sighed out. Her right hand slipped back into her pocket and she kicked at the rocky mixture that covered the play area. "Wasn't s'poseta leave the front yard..."

"Nymphadora Tonks! I have been looking all over the place for you!" The woman said, looking angry. "How many times must I tell you to never wander off like that?! You could have been kidnapped! Or WORSE!"

The girl visibly winced, and rightly so, Harry thought. To say that the woman was rather intimidating would be an understatement. She was quite tall - a few heads taller than Harry was, at least. She looked like she had been getting ready to go somewhere important - she was wearing very lovely, red robes with a golden trim. Her long, blonde hair was done up in a bun, and she was wearing long, silver earrings. Her eyes were the same color as the girl's were.

"MUM!" The girl whined, stomping her foot and glaring up at her mother. "Don't call me by my first name in publiic! I told you I don't like it! And besides, do you know who I found? Who I've been talking to?"

The woman's eyes flicked to Harry for a moment, then went back to her daughter. She was about to open her mouth when a rather strange look crossed over her face. Slowly, her head turned toward Harry and she stared at him. Her eyes moved up to his forehead, where his ever annoying, lightning bolt-shaped scar was. Presently, his bangs were off to either side of his face, leaving it quite out in the open.

"Good lord..." The woman said softly, a look of worry replacing the confused one she had been wearing. "Is it...?"

"Yeah! Mum, this is Harry Potter! Harry, this is my mum!" The girl said, cheerfully.

"My gracious, dear, you look in a horrible state... what happened to you?" The woman asked, voice softening considerably.

Harry's mind was -really- telling him to get out of there and run, now. He was barely capable of holding a conversation with someone his own age, let alone a strange adult. Trying to act as if she were one of his aunt's friends, he spoke carefully and politely, "N...nothing, ma'am... I just... fell asleep under this thing last night... it was an accident..."

"But your clothes! Your hair! For the love of Merlin, what does Albus think he's doing?" The woman sighed, shaking her head. "Harry... my name is Andromeda. Andromeda Tonks. I... well, let's just say I'm a friend, alright?"

Harry nodded cautiously.

"Mum! Ask him if he's gotten his letter yet!" The girl said, tugging at the sleeve of her mother's robes.

Andromeda blinked once, then got an odd look in her eyes. Whispering a thanks to her daughter, she smiled at Harry again and asked, "Have you received any...strange letters in the post lately, dear?"

"No, ma'am...I never get any letters..." Harry replied softly, not meeting her eyes.

"Oh, dear. Well, maybe you'll get one in the next few days. You'd best get back home - your family's probably worried about you."

At the mention of the Dursley's, Harry visibly flinched. Andromeda frowned. "What's wrong, dear?"

"I... I should be getting back... back home..." Harry said, wishing more than anything to get out of the park. Something about the woman and girl bothered him, though he couldn't place his finger on why, exactly, that was.

Andromeda surveyed him slowly, then asked, "Dear, is your family... well, forgive me for asking, but are they treating you right?"

Harry flinched again.

Andromeda got a strange look on her face, then. "Nymmy, I think it would be best if your new friend here spent the night at our house. There are a few things I think Albus should know about."

Harry's head jerked up, gaping at Andromeda. "W...What?!"

"Don't call me Nymmy!" The girl said, pouting.

"Shush, Nymmy. Harry, dear, come along now. We live just a few blocks away. We WERE just about to have breakfast when my dear daughter here got away from me..." Andromeda said, fixing the girl with a look.

"I... I don't..." Harry began. He was very cautious around anyone he didn't know - which was practically everybody. But these two... Harry felt there was a decidedly strange quality to them. His mind weighed his options. He could either return to Number Four and, in all likelihood, get beaten senseless... he could go with the Tonks' back to their house - at least for a night or two... or he could just take off running and not look back.

His stomach made the decision for him.

"Oh, my..." Andromeda said at the loud growl that had emanated from Harry's midsection. "Well, I think a PART of you wants to come along for a bit of food, am I right?"

Harry blushed and lowered his head, nodding slightly.

The girl giggled and promptly stepped over, taking one of Harry's hands into her own. "Come on, Harry! Mum's a great cook!"

Blinking, and feeling his cheeks burning just slightly, Harry allowed himself to be tugged along by the girl as she and her mother left the park. After a few blocks, Harry's curiosity failed him and he asked the girl, very softly, "You...don't like your name?"

The girl looked at him and, after a brief scowl directed at her mother, nodded. "Mum named me... Nymphadora," She said, making a face. "I can't stand it... an' she calls me 'Nymmy' all the time just t'embarrass me, I think. Look, jus' call me 'Tonks' an' we'll get along famously."

"Um...okay..." Harry replied. He noticed idly that Tonks seemed to be missing one of her front teeth. She seemed to notice him looking and grinned.

"Lost it inna fight at primary school last year... mum says the new tooth should be comin' in anytime..."

"Ahh, here we are, you two! Come on, inside and wash up. I'll have breakfast ready by the time you get back down!" Andromeda said as she wheeled the children towards a rather generic, smallish two-story. It rather resembled Number Four in many ways, though it looked slightly bigger, Harry thought.

As they entered, Andromeda headed off through a doorway and Tonks led Harry down the hall and into the washroom. Turning on the faucet, she grabbed a bar of soap and began washing her hands. "So...you dress like that all the time, or what?" She asked. Harry blushed and looked off.

"It's what my relatives give me." He said, simply. "I get all of my cousin's hand-me-downs. He... well... he's quite a bit bigger than me."

Harry paused, then offered Tonks a faint smile as he added, "Just picture a pig in a blonde wig and you'd have my cousin."

Tonks snorted.

After Harry had washed up, Tonks led him through the house and into the kitchen, which doubled as a dining room. Sure enough, a full breakfast spread was laid out on the round table at the south end of the room. Harry was, in a word, baffled. Openly confused at how fast Tonks' mother had prepared it so quickly, Harry sat down. His stomach gave another growl, causing Tonks to giggle.

"Alright, dear, let's get you fed, shall we?" Andromeda said kindly. "You look half-starved. Eat all you'd like, there's plenty to go around."

"How... How did you make this so FAST?" Harry asked, still rather stunned. "I do the cooking at the Dursley's' and... and... well, it usually takes me a BIT of time, at least..."

Tonks and her mother exchanged a quick glance that Harry didn't see. "Family secret." Andromeda finally said, providing Harry with a wink. "I've got a call to make, so you two tuck in."

It took another growl from Harry's stomach to get him to finally start eating. He tried to keep his manners about him, since he WAS a guest in the Tonks' house. And, while he didn't sling crumbs about or eat in a way similar to Dudley, he did devour his food at an alarmingly-fast rate. In addition, he ate quite a bit of the food provided. He was just finishing off one last bite of sausage when Andromeda came walking in, looking a bit more cheerful than she had when she had left.

"Well, now that that's taken care off -- good heavens, dear!" The woman observed how much food had been consumed in her relatively short absence. Grinning, she looked down at Harry and asked, "Feeling better?"

Harry hiccupped and leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his chest. "I will be once everything moves down past my chest..." He muttered quietly. "I'm...I'm not exactly used to eating so much..."

"Obviously." Andromeda said as she sat at the only remaining chair. "Well, I'm glad I could at least offer you a decent meal. Harry, if you don't mind another question... when's your birthday?"

Harry opened his mouth once, paused, then said, "July 31st..."

"And you'll be turning 11, correct?"

"That's right..."

Tonks let out a happy sort of 'whoop!' at this, though Harry wasn't quite sure why. After all, his birthdays were always ignored back at Number Four.

"Right, then! Well, what kind of cake would you like?" Andromeda asked, still smiling.

Harry stared at her. "Oh...Oh, no, I couldn't..." He began, not knowing quite what to say. He had never actually EATEN cake before. This was mainly due to the fact that Dudley had a tendency to almost inhale his own birthday cakes whenever he sat down to eat them.

"Not sure? Well, that's alright. Let's try a little bit of everything, then. Make a day of it." Andromeda said, clapping her hands together.

"W...Why are..." Harry let out a somewhat frustrated sigh at his speech, then tried again after a deep breath. "Why...are you being so nice to me? It's not that...that I don't appreciate it, but..." He trailed off, looking down at his empty plate.

When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he looked up once again. "Harry, you seem to've gone through quite an ordeal with your relatives. And while I can't pretend to know what you've been through - nor will I make you tell me - I would like to try and help you out a bit."

Andromeda sat back in her chair and blew out a breath, then began again, "You're always welcome here, alright? If things ever get too bad at your relatives' house, feel free to come by here."

Harry sat in silence for awhile before nodding slightly. "It... well, I won't say it's not bad," he said eventually. "But it's tolerable. I just..."

just have to be careful is all. And I'm not there all the time. The Dursley's go out all the time... they leave me with Mrs. Figg... she's alright, if you overlook her...her thing for cats..."

"Mrs. Figg? Arabella Figg?" Andromeda asked, brow creased.

"Yes, that's her... do you know her?" Harry said, looking up.

"Well...nor personally, no. Though we've crossed paths a few times. I wasn't aware that she babysat for anyone these days..." Andromeda replied, tilting her head slightly.

"Mum, time." Tonks said, grinning.

"What? Oh, dear...I'm late!" Andromeda said, pulling a clock from her robes and staring at it. "Nymmy, look after Harry while I'm gone, alright? I'll be back at the usual time!"

And with that, Andromeda stood and swept out of the room. Harry heard the door open and close a moment later. Utterly confused, he looked back at Tonks and was about to ask what just happened when she spoke again.

"Mum's always late for work," she explained, rolling her eyes. "I have to remind her most mornings. She'll be back in time for supper, though."

Harry frowned. "And...and she lets you stay here, all by yourself?"

"Sure." Tonks shrugged, smiling crookedly. "She knows I only wander off while she's around. S'no fun, otherwise. Come on, lemme show ya up to the guest bedroom. The bed in there's really nice..."

And so, Harry was led back upstairs and down the hall. Tonks hadn't been lying - the bed was wonderful. Especially in comparison to the ancient relic of a mattress that his uncle had shoved into the cupboard. After kicking off his slightly dusty shoes, he flopped back onto it and let out a groan. His lower back was yelling at him for having slept in such an awkward state the night before.

Tonks rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, grinning at him. "Don't fall asleep, Harry..." She said.

"I won't," Harry mumbled, eyes trying to keep themselves opened. "S'just... nice, that's all..."

Tonks sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at him. A peaceful silence filled the room for a few minutes before Tonks asked, "Hey, Harry?"

"Mm?"

"How come ya don't just jinx your relatives or somethin'?"

"Jinx?"

"Yeah... well, I'm assuming one of your relatives is like us, anyway."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "What'ya mean, 'like us'?"

Tonks opened her mouth, then shut it again, turning slightly pink.

"Um..."

"...And since I know I don't talk in my sleep...I'm still kinda curious as to how you knew my name..."

Tonks nibbled at her lower lip nervously. "W...well, you were talking in your sleep when I found you... and anyway, how would you know whether you did or not, eh? You record yourself sleeping and listen to it in the mornings?"

A shadow passed over Harry's face for a moment before his gaze shifted from Tonks to the ceiling. The room was painted in a lovely light blue color, and the clouds on the ceiling almost seemed to be moving. In fact, Harry thought, as he observed for awhile longer, the clouds WERE moving. Blinking a few times, Harry decided to look elsewhere. His lack of sleep was obviously making him see things.

"No," he finally said, his voice quiet. "It's just... I've learned not to."

"Why'd'ya wanna learn someth-- ...Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Whassat on your shoulder?"

Harry turned to frown at Tonks. She was looking towards his right shoulder, where his oversized, ratty shirt had slipped over, revealing a large, ugly bruise. Harry quickly grabbed his shirt and tugged it back up, feeling suddenly panicked. "It...it was nothing, I... I just fell, that's all..."

But Tonks seemed to think otherwise. After a few moments of looking as if she were working something through, she frowned and asked, "They don't HURT you, do they?" She asked.

Harry was beginning to get annoyed at just how many times he was flinching that day.

"They ARE? Oh, Harry... why didn't you say something? Mum could have done something about it!" Tonks said, squirming around. "Hex all o'them into next week, she could!"

"It's fine." Harry said dully, not looking in Tonks' direction. "It'll be gone in a day or two. They don't last long, anymore. M'body's gotten used to 'em..."

"Shouldn't have to get USED to somethin' like that!" Tonks exclaimed, flailing her arms about wildly. "Should turn those no good relatives of yours into the law or somethin'!"

"Look," Harry sighed, turning his gaze back to Tonks. He looked far too old for his age. "It's just how things are...if they ever found out I'd gone to the police, I'd be done for...They'd just spirit me off to Mrs. Figg's house... s'not like there's any evidence that I live there..."

"Whattaya mean?"

Harry sighed, shutting his eyes and trying to concentrate on just how very comfortable the large bed was. "Well, there are no pictures of me anywhere... I'm an embarrassment to them, see... dunno what I did to make 'em feel that way... I...It's just how I've always remembered them thinking. And my 'bedroom' is the cupboard under

the stairs. Just got an old mattress with the springs poking through the top as a bed."

Tonks gaped openly at him, looking thunderstruck. "What?! You can't be serious!" When Harry didn't reply, she murmured, "You -are-serious..."

She sighed and shook her head. "You should really tell mum... she's got 'connections,' as she puts it... knows people, I guess. She'd be able to getcha outta there. You do want outta there, don'tcha, Harry? ...Harry?"

But Harry could not hear her. His body, feeling the effects of his first real breakfast settling in, combined with the soft bed and his general fatigue, had finally given out on him. Tonks sighed again and poked him in the side; just to be sure he was really asleep. When he didn't budge, she leaned back on her arms. "Maybe I should tell mum for ya, then..." She whispered.

Towards the end of the afternoon, a voice from downstairs called out, "Nymmy! Harry! I'm home!"

When no response came, Andromeda began wandering the house, hoping that her daughter hadn't decided to take Harry out and about. Once chase-down was more than enough for a single day.

She headed upstairs and began searching through the bedrooms, starting with her own, then heading to her daughter's, and finally going to the guest bedroom. When she got there, she stopped and blinked at the sight before her.

Harry was still lying, sprawled out on his back in the middle of the bed, very much asleep. Tonks was curled up in a ball towards the foot of the bed, her face just a foot or so away from one of Harry's outstretched arms.

"Aww...and me without a camera," Andromeda said in a hushed voice. "Right... you two rest a little while longer. I'll go get supper ready." With that, she stepped out of the room, carefully shutting the door behind her, and headed downstairs. But, as she passed by the living room, she remembered something she had said earlier.

Walking in and heading to the fireplace, she grabbed a handful of Floo Powder from the mantle and tossed it in, saying, "Albus Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

Moments later, the face of an old, wizened man appeared within the green flames that the Powder produced. He smiled when he saw her. "Ahh, Andromeda. How has your day been?"

"Well, MY day has been just fine, thank you. Harry's, on the other hand..."

Dumbledore frowned slightly, nodding. "Ah yes... so he is still at your house, then?"

"Yes... he and Nymmy are upstairs, out like lights, if you'll pardon the expression. Was on my way to make supper when I remembered that I told you I'd call once I got home..."

Dumbledore nodded again. "Andromeda, his letter will be coming by tonight... and one for young Nymphadora, as well."

"Oh, will they? Good... I'm still a bit worried, Albus. I told Nymmy she shouldn't mention our world to him if she ever saw him on the streets, but... well, after never seeing him outside in all the time we've been here..." Andromeda said, trailing off. "I'll be glad once he knows, though. It'll be much easier around here when I don't have to be so secretive."

"Has he taken to the two of you very well?"

"Oh, yeah... he seems a bit shy and introverted right now... dunno what on earth those Muggles have done to him. I was rather hoping you could come by with his letter in person, Albus. I said I wouldn't pry into his personal life, but... well, I'm worried about him. He looks horrible. He ate like he had never been allowed to before! Thin as a rail, he is. Probably'd blow away in a strong breeze."

Dumbledore thought over the proposition for a moment before shaking his head. "No... no, I think it best that I not get involved just yet, Andromeda. I would appreciate it if you and your daughter kept a

close eye on him, however. Once he gets his letter, though... I was rather hoping you could help get him adjusted, as it were..."

Andromeda hesitated briefly before nodding. "If that's what you think is best, Albus. Now, if you'll excuse me... I really should be getting that supper ready. Was out on wild goose chases all ruddy afternoon."

Dumbledore chuckled softly and gave the woman a nod. "Good day to you, then. Feel free to call again if anything comes up."

And with that, the green flames died. Andromeda watched the fireplace for a moment longer before murmuring, "I hope to the gods I won't have to, Albus. I really do."

And with that, Andromeda Tonks turned and headed out of the living room.

Chapter 2 – Blood Red Tears

"TWO WHOLE DAYS!"

Harry's air rushed out of him in one quick blow.

"DO YOU KNOW HOW HUNGRY WE'VE BEEN?! HAD TO ORDER OUT LAST NIGHT!"

Harry winced as the small of his back met the corner of a table.

"ALMOST FOULED UP DUDLEY'S BIRTHDAY, YOU INSOLENT WHELP!"

Harry clamped his mouth closed to keep from coughing the blood out.

"NOW GET YOUR FILTHY ARSE INTO THAT KITCHEN AND GET TO WORK, BOY!"

Shakily, Harry got to his feet again and walked from the living room to the kitchen. He had turned up at just after 7AM that morning, hoping to sneak in while everyone was still sleeping. But, apparently, Vernon had been waiting for him. Now, forcing himself to swallow the blood he had prevented from hitting any of the Dursley's furniture, Harry washed his hands and started making breakfast.

He had assumed he would be hurt for being gone for so long, so it hadn't been a complete surprise when Vernon had laid into him. But it hurt, nonetheless. Carefully putting a few rashers of bacon into the frying pan, Harry looked over to the table out of the corner of his eyes. His Aunt Petunia was busy pining over how 'cute' her portly son was becoming and how much fun they would have today.

Dudley had a small mountain of birthday presents stacked up beside the table, making for some tricky maneuvering on Vernon's part. Dudley seemed to be ignoring his mother, instead choosing to count how many presents had been wrapped up. It was almost sickening to Harry how much his aunt and uncle would spend on their whale of a son. In his mind, he prayed that someday, someone would give them

all exactly what they deserved.

As he began preparing some sausages for cooking, he thought back to the previous night at the Tonks' house. It had been very different there. For one thing, Andromeda seemed to treat him twice as nicely (and less obnoxiously) as the Dursleys treated Dudley. And she seemed to let her daughter, who refused to be called by her given name, quite a bit of freedom. Somehow, Andromeda had gotten a hold of some pajamas that fit him perfectly. He had asked how and, winking, Andromeda said one word: "Magic!"

This got Harry to thinking quite a bit more than his mind was used to. Magic... if only such a thing really existed. Harry had gone over all of the things he would have done to the Dursleys had he been able to use it. The first thing that crossed his mind was turning his cousin into an actual pig. He went on to make up ideas on spells that would repel food away from his uncle whenever he got close to it.

He had had a wonderful time spending the night with Tonks and her mother. But reality had set in early the next morning when he realized that he had to return to Number Four. Andromeda promised that he could stop by at any time, day or night, if anything bad ever happened. And, while extremely nice of her, Harry didn't think it would be polite to ask if he could stay the night two days in a row. Especially since he had just met them.

Tonks had told him, as she walked to the end of Privet Drive with him, that he should keep an eye out for any letters for him. Harry asked what she meant, but she just grinned at him and shook her head. In any case, wondering about letters and wishing for magic powers didn't get breakfast cooked. And Harry would, in all honesty, rather sit in his cupboard than listen to his aunt make a fuss over his cousin.

"And we'll even take you and Piers to the zoo! How does that sound, my sweet Duddykins?" Petunia cooed.

Dudley nodded vigorously, which made all five of his chins wobble slightly. Harry carted breakfast over after sneaking a rasher of bacon for his own. His cousin immediately dove into what was presented to

him, wolfing it down at an astonishing rate. Vernon reached around the paper he was reading and grabbed a sausage with his fingers. His aunt continued to fuss about and make sure everything was perfect.

Harry was just about to collect the dishes to wash them when the phone rang. As Vernon was just finishing his paper, he set it down and waddled over to answer it. "Dursley Residence." He said. He was silent for a few moments as the person on the other end of the line spoke. With each passing second, he seemed to get paler and paler. There was an audible click from the other end and, after snapping out of his state, Vernon hung his end up, as well.

"That was Mrs. Figg." He said, looking over to Petunia. "She says she can't take the boy today because she's in the hospital with a broken leg."

"What?!" Petunia screeched, dropping the present she was holding. (and ignoring the "Ouch!" Dudley made when it landed on his fat fingers) "She HAS to take him! I'm certainly not leaving him here! Who knows WHAT he'd do!"

Vernon rubbed his chins as if stroking an imaginary beard. He fixed a piercing glare at Harry as he did this, making the boy feel more than a little uncomfortable. "Well," he began slowly. "Couldn't we get one of your friends to watch him? Or, perhaps, Marge?"

"I'm not letting MY friends know about HIM." Petunia said, pointedly. "And Marge is vacationing somewhere in Wales, I think."

Dudley was looking from one parent to the other, looking as if he were watching a tennis match. As the grim reality of the situation finally hit him, he stomped his foot and cried, "I don't WANT him to come to the zoo with us!"

Vernon was just about to reply when there came a hard knock at the door. Vernon and Petunia exchanged horrified looks before she took off to answer it. Harry was still trying to process what had just happened.

"Dudley! Your friend is here!" Petunia called from the other room. Dudley looked once to his father, then to Harry, sneered, and took off as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. Once alone in the kitchen with his uncle, Harry quickly resumed gathering the dishes up. The sound of Dudley chatting animatedly with Piers emanated from the general direction of the living room.

"Right. No other alternative." Vernon hissed out through clenched teeth. He stormed over to Harry and grabbed him by the shoulder, glaring daggers at him as he growled, "Suppose you think this is funny, don't you? Us not having any other choice but to take you with us. Well, you know this, boy. If you put a single toe out of line while we're out - if you do anything FUNNY - you won't be able to walk for a bloody MONTH!"

His voice was kept dangerously low so as not to alert the guests as to what was going on, but Harry shuddered anyway. He nodded and, when his uncle let him go and made to leave the room, he let out the breath he had been holding. There must have been some kind of higher power watching over him. Beating aside, this would be the second day in a row in which an enjoyable activity was presented to him.

He had just finished washing and drying the dishes when his aunt reappeared, carrying some folded up clothes. She tossed them onto the counter beside the sink and glared at Harry. "You'll put these on and be out to the car in five minutes! Can't have you running around in public in THAT outfit!"

As she left again, Harry turned to see that some of his cousin's uglier clothing had been picked out for him. They were perfectly bland and consisted of very large, brown trousers and an equally hideous, beige t-shirt. He figured that he was to use his usual, tattered belt to hold the trousers up.

However atrocious the clothing was, the fact remained that Harry would be going to the zoo for the first time in his life. He smiled as he changed, the morning's beating already pushed from his mind.

Alas, all good things must end - sometimes in ways that no one could

have predicted. Something very peculiar had happened during their trip to the zoo. Something that, while everyone knew Harry couldn't have possibly done it, he got blamed for anyway. And when they had arrived back at Number Four late in the afternoon, Vernon and Petunia went off upstairs. Petunia had been in a right state ever since the ordeal unfolded and needed calming.

This left Harry to fend for himself downstairs against Dudley and Piers. The trio looked at each other, tension growing as the seconds ticked by. Harry saw his cousin twitch a split-second before he actually moved, and used it to turn tail and run. The sound of footsteps rang out behind him, and he knew he had to get away as fast as humanly possible. While his uncle never hurt him in a place readily visible to the public. But his cousin and his friends never had any qualms against beating him black and blue.

His cousin wasn't the primary concern, though. Harry knew he was faster than Dudley. But Piers wasn't slow by any means. Oftentimes, he would rush out and tackle Harry to the ground, giving Dudley enough time to catch up and commence the beating. He would sit himself down on Harry's chest, which was punishment in and of itself. He would then take any open shots he could until he felt Harry had had enough.

Eventually, Harry made his way back through the house and out the front door. At least if he were outside, he would make his cousin think twice about doing anything. His relatives were frightfully concerned with how the neighbors saw them. And so, they always acted disturbingly pleasant when out in public.

But as he bolted out and into the yard, his eyes went wide. He was greeted by a smiling, if slightly confused, face.

"Wotc--HEY!" Tonks began, then yelped as Harry suddenly grabbed her by the arm and resumed running. "Harry! What are you doing?!"

"Look behind you and keep running!" Harry said, not bothering to look back. The slight delay in Tonks' surprising appearance had slowed him down enough for Piers to be close to tackling range. Sure enough, Tonks let out a little squeak when she saw the two boys

chasing after them.

"Wait! Harry, stop!" She exclaimed, looking to him. "I have an idea!"

"What is it?" He asked, showing no signs of slowing.

"You'll see! Just...stop, alright?"

Against his better judgment, Harry stopped. Piers and Dudley, who was some ways behind his friend, weren't quite expecting a dead halt in their victim.

"Wotcher!" Tonks said cheerfully as she turned to look at Dudley and Piers. Harry gaped at her.

"Why're you two chasing Harry, eh?" She asked, tilting her head and looking amazingly confused and innocent.

Dudley sputtered for a minute before turning to Harry and asking, "Who's this?!"

"Name's Tonks." Said the girl in question.

"Tonks? What kind of a name is TONKS?" Piers sneered.

Tonks turned and glared at him. "And what's YOUR name? Ratty the Rat Boy? Wormy McBudgeover?"

Piers glared at the girl. Dudley was about to open his mouth again when she turned on him, as well. "What about you? Pudge O'Lumpkin? Titanic Gitman?"

Neither Dudley nor Piers were used to people talking to them like that. Much less when the speaker was a GIRL. Tonks was dressed in jeans that seemed a few shades darker than the ones she had on the day before, and was wearing a pink t-shirt. And, Harry noticed with a look of utter confusion, her hair had changed. It was still short and very much spiky, but it was a furious orange now.

"Cat got your tongues?" Tonks asked, her innocently sweet voice

back once more. "Well, if neither of you are gonna talk, Harry and I should get going. I forgot that I said we'd go visit the park again today." Here, she turned to Harry and offered an apologetic sort of smile, along with a wink that was hidden from Dudley and Piers.

"How do you know HIM?" Dudley asked, eyes narrowing as he looked from the girl to his thin cousin. "And why're you hanging around him?"

"Well, not that it's any o' your business, y'great lump, but we met in the park a few weeks ago. And I'm hanging around him because... well... he's my boyfriend, isn't he? Boyfriends and girlfriends spend time with each other, see..."

All three boys gaped at her as she said this, though Harry tried to force himself to recover first. He wasn't sure whether Tonks was trying to shock his cousin and Piers into a coma or what, but he wasn't getting pummeled, so it was obviously working.

"Now, if you two will excuse us, we should get going. Mum's probably waiting for us. She packed your favorite sandwiches for lunch again, Harry." Tonks said, whirling about, taking Harry by the arm, and starting off down the sidewalk with him.

They got halfway down the block before Harry dared look over his shoulder. Dudley and Piers were staring after him, mouths still hanging open. Grinning crookedly, Harry looked to Tonks and, after finding his voice again, asked, "What was THAT?"

Tonks let go of his arm and crossed hers behind her head, smiling at him. "Mum says I talk too much... but it comes in handy sometimes. M'good at thinkin' on my feet."

"Yeah, but... well, I've never seen anyone stand up to them like that. Last person that tried apparently got a few teeth knocked out. And... and no, it wasn't me." Harry said. And then, noticing her hair again, asked, "And what on earth did you do to your hair?"

"Huh? Oh, that? Um... I dyed it! Mum wouldn't let me get any of the nicer colors like blue or violet... but she said orange wasn't that bad.

Say, did you get your letter this morning, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, uhm... no, I didn't." Harry replied, brow creasing. "And I didn't see any laying about when we got home, either."

"Got home? Thoughtcha said they didn't take you anywhere."

Harry had spent a few hours the previous night talking a bit more openly about his life at Number Four. He said it made him feel a bit better, getting it out in the open with someone.

"Zoo." Harry said with a shrug. "Mrs. Figg is in the hospital or something and they wouldn't dream of letting me stay at the house by myself..."

"Ahh, gotcha." Tonks said. "Guess that's why you're wearing...THAT?"

Harry made a face. "My aunt picked the clothes out for me."

In addition to learning to like Tonks and her mother, he had stopped speaking so jerkily. It only happened from time to time when speaking to either of them, and usually only if they asked too personal a question. It was still bad around his relatives, though.

"Well," Tonks said, grinning once more, "I got MY letter today. C'mon, I'll letcha see it! Mum told me you should have gotten yours today, too. Maybe she knows why you didn't..."

"Maybe." Harry said, raising his eyebrows. "What kind of letter is it?"

"You'll see! Come on!"

With this, Tonks grabbed Harry by the arm and started running. Harry blinked, but kept up with her, wanting to figure out what this whole business with letters was about. He hadn't given much thought to the subject, but looking back, he thought he should have. It did seem rather odd that both of them mentioned receiving a mysterious letter out of the blue.

Once they had arrived safely back at Tonks' house, without being followed by Dudley and Piers, Tonks took a good look at her new friend. "Blimey, what happened to you? Y'look like someone set a rogue bludger off on ya!"

Harry started to reply when he blinked and frowned. "What's a bludger?" He asked.

Tonks winced, then waved a hand dismissively. "Isn't important. Look, Harry... did those Mu-- uh...relatives of yours punish you for being gone for so long...?"

Harry looked off and muttered, "No."

Tonks raised an eyebrow. "C'mon, Harry. Might not've known you for very long, but you're a horrible liar."

Harry shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I get punished for being alive most of the time. One more won't hurt."

"Harry!" Tonks exclaimed, throwing her hands up. "I toldja last night after dinner! If they started whompin' on ya, for you to come back here! How many times d'we hafta tell ya before it sinks in?"

"Sorry." Harry offered, not quite meeting Tonks' gaze.

Tonks winced again. "Look, don't be sorry. Where'd you get it this time, huh?"

"Stomach. Got knocked into a table, and my lower back started hurting after I took off running...so I've probably got a bit of skin taken out of it..." Harry said in a monotone.

"You're gonna make me old before my time." Tonks said under her breath. "Right...mum might sit by and letcha get pounded, but I've never been one to follow in her footsteps. Come with me."

Harry blinked, suddenly feeling tense. "Where are we going?"

"To talk to a friend of mum's." Tonks said, walking with Harry into the

living room. "Right, you stand...here." She said, positioning Harry in front and slightly to the left of the fireplace. She then reached up into a bowl on the mantle, spilling a bit of the powder that she withdrew.

"Whassat?" Harry asked, squinting at her hand.

"Floo Powder. Now don't go getting spooked on me, alright? Now then... Albus Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! ...Hey, I actually remembered it!" Tonks said, smiling.

Harry goggled as the powder erupted into green flames upon hitting the bottom of the fireplace. A moment later, he let out a yelp and fell over onto his rear end as the face of a very old man suddenly appeared IN the flames. "Andromeda? Is somethi--"

The face of Albus Dumbledore froze when it saw two children instead of a full-grown witch. His surprise lasted but a second before he turned to Tonks and smiled. "Young Nymphadora, was it? Ahh, and to what do I owe this unexpected call?"

Tonks stuck her bottom lip out and pointed a finger at Harry. "Don't call me Nymphadora. And HE is the reason I called, sir. Jus' look at him!"

Dumbledore's head moved from Tonks to Harry. His eyes went over the boy's thin frame slowly. "This," he began, addressing Tonks, "is who I believe it to be?"

"It is. And he said he didn't get his letter, sir! You DID send him one, didn't you?" Tonks asked, frowning.

"It went out along with your own." Dumbledore said, brow creasing momentarily. "I do not believe the owl was intercepted...and it returned with no post...very curious, indeed."

"Sir, you've gotta do something. His relatives... well, they..." Tonks sputtered briefly before looking to Harry. Harry, for his part, looked (and felt) more confused than he had ever been in his life. "They - hurt- him, sir... he's shown me. Not just little things, either. Had this honkin' big bruise on his shoulder the other night!"

"I see." Dumbledore said, surveying Harry once more. "Perhaps I should pay your residence a visit tonight, then. Say...around suppertime?"

"Sure! I'll let mum know. I'm sure she wouldn't mind. She's been worried about him, too, but..."

Dumbledore nodded at Tonks' unfinished sentence. He then smiled pleasantly and said, "Well, I should go make preparations, then. I will see you both later this evening. Until then, have a good day."

And with that, the green-tinted head of the Headmaster of Hogwarts was gone. The flames slowly faded away and eventually died out completely. When they were gone, Tonks turned to Harry and smiled happily, hands on her hips. "Well, that's that, innit? You're gonna be just fine, Harry!"

It took nearly a minute before Harry found his voice again. But when he did, he pointed at the empty fireplace and asked in a voice a few octaves higher than the one he normally spoke in, "What...what just happened?!"

Tonks blew out a long sigh, walking over and offering Harry a hand up. "Long story, Harry. C'mon, the couch is comfier than the floor. I hope you don't mind a quick version of the story, though..."

Harry looked up at her, confusion evident in his eyes. But he nodded once, taking the lift to his feet. The two walked to the couch and Harry flopped back down. Tonks ran out of the room for a moment, coming back with a sizable scrapbook in her hands.

"First thing you need to know," she said as she sat back onto the couch, "is that me an' my mum aren't like you are. No, wait, that isn't right. Lemme start over. You, me, and my mum aren't like your relatives. There, that sounds a bit better."

"Whattaya mean?" Harry asked, eyeballing the scrapbook.

"We're wizards." Tonks said, shrugging. "Or, rather, you're a wizard.

Since we're girls, me an' mum are witches. Same thing, though."
again?"

"You're a wizard." Tonks said, smiling crookedly at Harry.

"What are you playing at?" He finally managed to say, gaping at Tonks as if she had sprouted an elephant's trunk.

"C'mon, Harry. Haven't ya ever done anything strange? Y'know, without really doing it on purpose?"

Harry was about to ask another question when that afternoon's events at the zoo flashed through his mind. His eyes grew wide. "...But no," he murmured to himself. "That...that was just... it couldn't have been..."

"Mind sharing, or wouldja rather keep talking to yourself like a nutter?" Tonks asked, grinning.

"Huh? Oh... I...I just remembered WHY I got beat this afternoon. It... well, it's Dudley's birthday today, see... and since they couldn't get a babysitter for me, I got taken along to the zoo with my aunt, uncle, cousin, and his best friend. Actually got treated fairly well while we were out in public, this awful outfit notwithstanding... but... but while we were there..."

Harry hesitated, looking up into Tonks' eyes. He COULD tell her... but what if she thought he really WAS a bit on the loony side? Then again, he told himself as his eyes wandered up to her hair, she was pretty odd in her own right. Licking his lips, Harry finished, "I... I THINK I made a huge pane of glass guarding a snake disappear..." He paused, then frowned. "And my hair never wants to stay cut. Got my head shaved nearly bald once, and my hair completely grew back overnight."

Tonks dropped the scrapbook.

When Harry looked up at her, she was staring at him with a mixture of horror and shock on her face. "Your...hair grew back overnight?" She

asked, voice quiet.

"Yeah... why? I mean, I know it's strange, but--ACK!"

Harry had been cut off by Tonks quite literally propelling herself across the couch. Arms were wrapped around him and Harry soon found himself being held onto by a whimpering girl. Feeling very nervous and not quite sure how to act, Harry sort of patted her on the back and said, "Um, there there? Why....why are you upset?"

Tonks drew back, wiping at her eyes quickly. She then beamed up at Harry and shook her head quickly. "M'not upset... I...I just never thought..."

"Never thought...what?"

Tonks scooted back to her original position, suddenly blushing as she grabbed the scrapbook again. "That'll hafta come after I explain everything else. Look... Harry, I dunno how to tell ya this, but... well... in our world - that is, the Wizarding world... you're a regular hero..."

"...A hero." Harry repeated.

"Yeah... look, I can prove it." She said, flipping the scrapbook over to one of the first pages. A newspaper clipping covered the page. In the photograph - which, to Harry's amazement, was moving - a giant, skull-shaped object seemed to be hovering in the air over a group of houses. The headline read 'The Dark Lord's Rise.'

"Long time ago...the Wizarding world was bein' terrorized by a group of... well, bad guys, I guess you could call 'em, though they were more than 'bad,' really... a group of bad guys went around, killing people an' causing panic... their leader was a guy that was feared so much, people wouldn't even call him by his name. Scared of it, see. They just called him 'You-Know-Who' or 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named'..."

"He was a powerful dark wizard, Harry. Mum told me there hadn't been a wizard as evil as him since Grindewald waaaay back in the 40s... Anyway, he went around, mainly killin' Muggles and--"

"Muggles?" Harry interrupted.

"Oh, sorry... uh, we call non-Wizarding people 'Muggles'... people like your fat little cousin, for instance." Tonks said, making a face at the all-too-recent memory of Dudley.

"Oh..."

"Went around killing Muggles and Muggle-born wizards as he pleased, since no one was brave enough to try an' stop him." Tonks said. She started flipping through the pages of the scrapbook. On each one, there was at least a single news article about attacks, deaths, and other nasty subjects. All of them mentioned the dark wizard that Tonks had told him about, though none called him by his true name.

"Strange thing is," Tonks began again, flipping ahead to the back of the book, "he got stopped...an' no one was really sure how..."

Harry blinked at the news article he was being shown. The picture was of a house that had been all but burned to the ground. The headline under it read, "DARK LORD DEFEATED!"

The article went on to detail how 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' led an attack on Godric's Hollow and how he, Harry, had somehow managed to rebound what it called the 'Killing Curse.'

"Killing Curse?" Harry asked, blankly. His eyes didn't leave the clipping.

"Dark magic. Does what it sounds like it does. S'illegal." Tonks said, watching Harry carefully.

When he finished reading, Harry sat back, gazing over towards the fireplace with a glazed look on his face.

"Harry? You alright...?"

"They told me my mum and dad died in a car crash." He said quietly.

"Told me that that's how I got my scar..."

Tonks closed the book, setting it onto a small table at her end of the couch. Slowly, she scooted closer and put a hand on Harry's arm.

"Always wondered why they forbid me to ask about my parents..." Harry continued, his voice sounding strangely hollow. "Must be why... the Dursley's hate anything that doesn't fit their vision of 'normal.'"

Harry closed his eyes. "S'far back as I can remember, I've had dreams about a strange, green light..."

"Sounds like the Killing Curse, alright... overheard mum talking to some friends awhile back..." Tonks said. She let out a groan and glared at the fireplace. "Sorry I didn't tell ya yesterday, Harry. I should've as soon as I saw what awful shape you were in... but Dumbledore – the guy I was talkin' to in the fire - he wanted you to grow up as a Muggle. No clue why, really... anytime I asked about you, he always said that it was 'in your best interests to not know of our world until you were ready for it.'"

Harry scowled. "Yeah, I've had a lovely time at Number Four." He muttered darkly, rubbing at his stomach lightly. "S'been a real ball."

"Hey, don't get uppity with me... I didn't like it, either. An' I really didn't like havin' to sendja BACK there this mornin'. I tried talking mum into just lettin' ya stay here, but..." Tonks trailed off, pouting once again.

"Sorry. But... but it IS a lot to take in at once." Harry said, voice distant. "So... I'm FAMOUS?"

"Famous as they get. You-Know-Who vanished after he got gobsmacked with his own Curse. Some folks say he died, but Dumbledore doesn't seem to think so... not from what I've heard him saying to mum and her friends, anyway. Thinks he's still out there, somewhere. All'a his followers scattered like rats, though... Wizarding world's been peaceful ever since..." Tonks said, her hand still on Harry's arm.

"...What was his name?"

"Whose?"

"This 'You-Know-Who' guy."

Tonks bit her lower lip. "Oh... Harry, I dunno... mum says that we mustn't say his name. I tried it once, just to see what kinda reaction it got. Mum recoiled, then grounded me for almost a MONTH. People are still scared of it, she told me."

"I wanna know," Harry began, reaching up and brushing his hair away from his scar. "the name of the guy who gave this to me."

Tonks looked around nervously, licking her lips. Then she sighed and leaned over, whispering, "Fine, but it's your fault if I get into trouble. It's... it's 'Voldemort.' Don't make me say it again, either."

"Voldemort." Harry repeated slowly.

Tonks shivered visibly. "Don't go throwin' it around, or you'll get into trouble, too." She warned. "Look, mum's gonna be home from work anytime now. It'll be easier now that you know whatcha are."

Harry's eyes lit up. "Is... is that how she made supper so quickly last night? Magic?"

"Yup!" Tonks said, grinning. "She's great at conjuring things up! Keeps telling me I should be pretty good at it, once I get into Hogwarts an' start learning..."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yeah. Best Wizarding school around this chunk o' the world. Albus Dumbledore's in charge o' the place. Ya know, mum told me that he was the only one You-Know-Who was scared of." Tonks said.

"Albus Dumbledore...the guy from the fire?"

"The very same."

"Okay," Harry said, rubbing his temples. "So... I'm a wizard... my parents were killed by this Voldemort guy, he couldn't kill me and his spell took HIM out, instead...and I'm famous for this?"

"That about covers it." Tonks grinned.

Harry let out a groan. "I think I need a nap. My head hurts from having all of this getting pounded into it at once. ...Besides that, I ache all over."

"Ahh," Tonks said, smirking as she hopped up. "We'll be able to fix you up proper, now that I toldja whatcha were, too. Y'can heal people if you know the right spells. Mum got taught some basic healing spells while she was pregnant with me. She was kinda clumsy when she was younger, and she wanted to be ready in case I started walking and fell down the stairs or somethin'. Go on upstairs and rest. I'll wake ya up when mum gets home."

Harry nodded once, picked himself up, and walked upstairs. He was asleep almost immediately.

Chapter 3 – Supper With the Headmaster

"Harry? Harry, c'mon, wake up!"

"Dunwanna..."

"Oi! Get up, y'big lump!"

"Nnng...."

"Mum! Harry won't get out of bed!"

Harry bit back a grin as Tonks called for her mother. Andromeda popped into the room a moment later to see Harry sitting up in bed, very much awake, with Tonks facing away from him. She rolled her eyes and asked, "Nymmy, he's sitting there, waving at me. I've got to go finish dinner. Albus will be here any time. Now go on, go change!"

"Awww, I don't wanna wear my dress robes!" Tonks whined, kicking at the floor. "Don't like blue."

"You'll wear them and like it, young lady." Andromeda replied in a stern parental tone.

"Whassa big deal, anyway? We'll see him nearly every day for like seven years... not like seeing me in a less than royal outfit is gonna tarnish the family name..."

"Nymphadora."

Tonks winced, then glared at her mother, who smiled sweetly. "Go on, then."

Tonks looked over her shoulder at Harry and scowled. "You don't get t' make fun o' me when ya see me..."

"Alright." Harry replied, still somewhat groggy.

As Tonks left the room, muttering under her breath, Andromeda rolled

her eyes and walked toward the bed. "Feeling better, dear? Nymmy told me how tired you were..."

Harry nodded. "I'm fine now, thanks... ...um, did she...?"

Andromeda pulled a face and looked towards the doorway. "Yes, she told me that you know... I wish she would have waited. There were better, more tactful ways of informing you. But what's done is done." She cleared her throat, then turned to look back at Harry and gave him a once-over. "She also mentioned being banged up. I'm no medi-witch, but I'm no slouch with healing spells, either."

"I'm fine. Just a big bruise and some sore muscles, really... I've had worse." Harry said.

"You shouldn't have." Andromeda said, frowning. After a moment, she sighed and smiled crookedly. "Go get cleaned up, Harry. Dinner's soon and we're having a guest. Hopefully he'll be able to explain why you didn't get your letter to Hogwarts..."

Harry nodded and Andromeda left the room, casting a glance over her shoulder as she did. Crawling out of bed, Harry stretched, wincing as his muscles howled out in pain. "Nng...Bloody Dursley's." He hissed, walking into the hallway and heading for the upstairs washroom.

Just as he reached the door, Tonks walked out of her bedroom, clad in sky blue dress robes with a fancy, white trim. She looked just shy of disgruntled. She spotted Harry and came to a halt. For a moment, the two just stared at each other. Tonks broke the silence when she looked off and grumbled, "I hate these... I'd rather go about in a t-shirt and jeans..."

"I dunno," Harry said, tilting his head. "They don't look THAT bad."

"You're hardly an authority on the subject." Tonks said, giving Harry the Evil Eye, which he ignored.

"Maybe not. But --" Harry paused here, then took a second look at Tonks. "...Your hair wasn't that color OR length earlier."

"I know." Came the reply. Tonks' hair was now down to the middle of her back and just as blue as her robes.

"...Let me guess - Magic?"

"Kinda."

But before Tonks could explain further, Andromeda's voice rang out from downstairs, "He's here! Both of you, hurry up and come down!"

Tonks sighed, shaking her head. "I'll go on. G'won an' get washed up."

With that, the bluenette turned and headed downstairs - very slowly, so as not to trip over her slightly large robes. Harry watched her with a ghost of a grin on his face before he turned and headed into the washroom.

When he entered the kitchen a few minutes later, it was to find three people at the table. Andromeda, Tonks, and a very, very old-looking man. He was wearing emerald-green robes with matching pointy hat and had the longest hair and beard that Harry had ever seen. Not that he got out enough to see many, but that was hardly the point.

"Ahh, there he is!" Andromeda said when she spotted him. "Come on over! Harry, this is Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Sir." Harry said, bowing his head politely in greeting. Harry had all but been the Dursleys' butler over the years and had learned how to properly greet people that one didn't know.

Dumbledore turned and looked Harry over. There was a strange twinkle in his eyes that Harry couldn't remember ever seeing in anyone else's. He felt nervous being surveyed by the man, though he couldn't quite place the reason.

"Ahh, Harry," Dumbledore began, smiling pleasantly. "I was wondering how you would turn out. It appears you are, in fact, quite different than what I had envisioned. However, this is not the time to

recall past... mistakes, if you will. Rather, I believe that I have something that was meant to already be in your possession." With this, he reached into his robes and pulled out a letter, which he handed out towards Harry.

Harry's eyes flicked quickly to Tonks, who grinned and nodded at him. He stepped over and took the letter from the Headmaster. He flipped it over and read the front of the envelope:

Mr.	H.	Potter
The	Guest	Bedroom
#9	Fenshank	Lane
Little		Whinging
Surrey		

He blinked at it, raising an eyebrow. It was quite unlike any other letter he had seen before. It was a thick, heavy sort of envelope. The writing on the front was as green as his eyes. And it seemed to be made, of all things, out of parchment. Ripping it open, he pulled out the letter and read:

"Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore..." His eyes skimmed down a bit, quickly glancing through the headmaster's numerous titles and briefly wondering what the devil a 'Mugwump' was. "Dear Mr. Potter," Harry continued quietly, "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31..."

He paused, then looked at Tonks and asked, "Owl?"

"S'the way we mail each other. Owls're really smart." Tonks replied, nodding sagely.

"Ahh." Harry said, looking down and over his list of supplies. "Um... Excuse me, but..."

"Wondering, perhaps, how you might be able to afford your books and supplies when you haven't a pence to your name?" Dumbledore

offered, still smiling. Harry just nodded dumbly.

"Ahh... you may be in for a bit of surprise when you visit Gringotts, then." The Headmaster said, chuckling. "Now, if the two of you do not mind..." He nodded to Tonks and Harry. "...I have some business to discuss with Andromeda..."

Tonks hopped from her spot at the table and, grinning, zipped over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and tugged him from the room. Once she had pulled him back into the living room, she was practically bouncing up and down. "I never toldja 'bout Gringotts, did I?" She asked.

Harry shook his head, gazing down at his letter once more. "No... what is it?"

"S'a bank. Run by goblins!"

"Oh." There was a pause. "...Wait, what?"

"Goblins!" Tonks repeated excitedly. "Been there a few times with mum. They're tiny little things, but they're right smart. Heard of a few people tha' got stuck in the vaults under the city... Oh, you're gonna love the cart ride! I think I even saw a dragon down one path..."

Harry blinked a few times, trying to work all of the hyper girl's words through his brain. "...Right. Look, Tonks... I'm just going to have to see most of this for my brain to understand properly. It's hard to imagine these things, given how I grew up."

"Nymmy! Harry! Dinner!" Andromeda's voice called.

"...That was quick." Harry said.

"Probably talking about us." Tonks replied with a shrug. As the two headed back toward the kitchen, Harry happened to be looking at his friend when something very strange happened. Her blue hair, which had been rather long just moments before, shortened to shoulder-length in front of his eyes. Harry gaped at this.

"S'wrong?" Tonks asked, finally noticing.

"Your hair! Just got shorter..." Harry managed.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Doesn't hang over my shoulders this way. Tends to be annoying, falling over my shoulders and into my food otherwise." Tonks replied, casually. Before Harry could ask anything further, they were back in the kitchen.

Dumbledore and Andromeda were still at the table, which was now sporting a rather lavish dinner spread. Tonks practically bounded over and began working on a porkchop. When Harry tucked himself in, he looked down at his letter once more.

"Future students usually receive them on their 11th birthday... but, in your case... I felt that an exception should be made. Especially given, shall we say, that you were found in." Said Dumbledore after swallowing a bit of salad.

Harry just nodded, folding the letter and tucking it back into the envelope. He set this on his lap and started piling food onto his plate. When Tonks noticed, she grinned at him and began copying him. When Harry was finished, both of them had the exact same things on their plates. Harry cast her a questioning glance.

"Bet I can beatcha." She said, a grin slowly spreading across her face.

Harry opened his mouth to respond, hesitated for a moment, then smiled and nodded.

"On three. Ready? One... two... THREE!"

Dumbledore and Andromeda watched on in amusement as the children practically inhaled the food on their plates. Though Tonks was trying her hardest to wolf down hers, Harry was simply faster by default. When one didn't normally get three squares a day, one tends to be able to ingest faster when presented with a good meal.

Harry, of course, won by a porkchop and two tomatoes. Tonks flopped back in her chair and groaned, patting her stomach and shaking her head. "Not gonna do THAT again..." She whined.

Harry just grinned.

"Andromeda, when did you plan to take them to Diagon Alley?" Dumbledore asked, his glance moving from the kids. Andromeda tilted her head back in thought before shrugging. "Well, I was figuring we'd go once Harry turned 11. Nymmy's birthday was a few weeks ago, so she's all set..."

Dumbledore nodded, stroking his beard (and removing a small bit of salad that had somehow missed his mouth) and murmuring, "I see, I see. And what, if anything, do you have planned for said birthday?"

"Well, I told Harry we could try out a few different cakes to see what kind he liked best." Andromeda replied with a smile, looking over at the boy in question. Harry, for his part, blushed and looked down at the letter in his lap.

Dumbledore nodded once, then leaned in toward Harry and stage whispered, "I recommend German chocolate. Very delicious, if I do say so." He straightened back up and cleared his throat. "It was a lovely meal, as always, Andromeda."

"I try." The witch said, flashing a corny sort of grin at the Headmaster. Tonks rolled her eyes and mouthed 'nutter' to Harry, who stifled a laugh.

The rest of dinner was spent digesting, discussing the future, and talking about what they had spent their summers doing. When it came time for Dumbledore to head back to the school, Tonks pulled her mother aside and asked if Harry could stay with them until September 1st. After sharing a quiet word with Dumbledore, Andromeda winked at her daughter.

Tonks, in turn, punched a fist into the air and nearly tackled Harry to the ground in her excitement. Harry gasped audibly as he watched Dumbledore Floo back to his office at Hogwarts, having only seen one part of what Floo Powder could do.

That night, Andromeda conjured Harry a pair of very comfortable

pajamas to sleep in. Harry was thankful for the change of clothes - ones that actually fit, to boot. Harry and Tonks stayed up well into the night, discussing what they would spend the next few weeks doing.

"I think we should get even with your relatives." Tonks said, her hair long again.

"Hm? How so?" Harry asked.

The two were sitting in the floor of the guest bedroom. Harry was leaning back against the bed; Tonks was across from him, leaning against the wall.

"Well... you shouldn't just up and leave without TELLING them, should you?" Tonks asked, a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"...What've you got planned?"

"Well... nothing, yet. Think about it, though! Mum could make you some really nice clothes, and the two of us can just go wandering in, chattin' away an' all. Nick somethin' from the fridge, maybe, before tellin' 'em you won't be back for awhile." Tonks explained. "If your aunt and uncle are anything like your cousin, it'd be right hilarious to see their reactions."

"I dunno..." Harry said, wearily. "I can't stay here forever..."

"Why not?"

Harry blinked. "Well, it'd... I mean... I don't wanna be a bother to you or your mum..."

"You aren't a bother." Tonks said, waving a hand dismissively. "In fact, once I get you loosened up a bit, we could have all sorts o' fun 'round here. S'been nice, having someone to talk to. No fun being alone."

Harry fidgeted for a moment, looking Tonks square in the eyes. Eyes, Harry noted with a bit of confusion, that seemed to be a rather light shade of brown now. "...Alright." He finally said slowly. "...We'll do it the first of August, after my birthday."

Tonks got a downright sneaky expression on her face as she grinned at Harry. "You won't regret it." She said, her voice solemn. "It'll be a day worth remembering!"

Chapter 4 – All That Glitters

"HAPPY

BIRTHDAY!"

Happy Potter, it could be said, had lived a hard life. His parents had been murdered when he was just a baby. He had been forced to spend his youth with relatives who frequently abused him physically. And, save for what Andromeda Tonks had conjured for him, he didn't have any clothes of his own that actually fit.

It had also made him a very nervous and rather jumpy person. It was because of this that, as the Tonks women woke him from a wonderful dream, he had fallen out of bed. Landing on his face, Harry groaned and promptly let the rest of his body crash down next to him. In a prone position, Harry mumbled, "Oww."

"Oh, god, I'm sorry!" Andromeda said, worriedly, rushing over to him and kneeling. Tonks opted to crawl across the bed and peer down at her friend's body.

"M'fine." Harry mumbled again. He then sat up, legs under him, and rubbed his nose. "Been woke up more times than I can count by Uncle Vernon yelling at me." He gave both females a lopsided, slightly apologetic smile.

Tonks rolled her eyes, then grinned at him. "C'mon, Harry! Today's the big day! We're gonna head off to Diagon Alley to get our school supplies. An' mum's got this GIANT cake down in the kitchen! Hurry up, wouldja? S'been staring me in the face for hours and mum won't even lemme nick a bit o' icing." She made a face at her mother at this.

Andromeda stood and grabbed her daughter by the ear, tugging her over to the door (with Tonks protesting the whole way) before she turned back to Harry. "Wash up and get dressed, dear. I'm going to have you both get some real food in you before I let you at the cake. After you've both had some time to digest, we'll get going."

With that, Andromeda tugged Tonks out into the hall, closing the door behind her. Harry chuckled and began slipping out of his pajamas. As

he opened the dresser that sat across the room from the bed, he rummaged through the various articles of clothing that Tonks' mother had conjured for him. He had protested at first, saying that he didn't want to be a nuisance. But he had lost in the end after Tonks had told him how nice he looked in black.

So black it had been from that point on. However, Andromeda had insisted on SOME color being in the clothing. So oftentimes, his shirts would have random patterns on them in various colors. Both Tonks and Andromeda thought that black robes with green trim brought out the color of his emerald eyes. Smiling fondly at the memory, Harry decided he would go with those robes.

He pulled them out, along with a gray undershirt and some black trousers to wear underneath. He got dressed quickly and walked out into the hallway, heading for the washroom. After spending a few minutes trying to tame his unkempt hair, he scowled and cleaned his face and hands, turning to go downstairs.

Whatever Harry had been expecting to see upon entering the kitchen, it certainly hadn't been a seven layer, multi-colored cake taking up a good chunk of the table. His only experience with cakes had been those that the Dursley's had bought for Dudley's birthdays. And those had been single layer ordeals. LARGE, yes. But still only one layer.

Tonks grinned and latched onto his right arm. "Alright, mum, get the breakfast made so's we can inhale it an' get to the good stuff!"

Harry could almost feel Andromeda roll her eyes. But moments later, the portion of the table not filled with the giant cake was holding a small bit of breakfast. "I shouldn't have made the cake first." She said, more to herself than anyone else. "Okay, be quick about it. But you're both eating a good, large lunch!"

"Yes, mum." Tonks said around a mouthful of toast.

Harry inhaled his food as usual, the strangely changing scent of the cake filling the air. "...Why's it keep smelling differently?" He finally asked, peering at the confection.

"Flavor changes, depending on what kind you'd like to have." Tonks replied, sipping at some pumpkin juice. "I heard Dumbledore saying to try German chocolate, but I rather like angel food cake, m'self."

"...Mind if I try both?" Harry asked, leaning back in his chair and tilting his head back to stare up toward the top of the towering cake.

"Be my guest." Andromeda replied, looking rather amused. She flicked her wand and four thin slices of cake dislodged from the very top of the cake. Two floated onto Tonks' plate, two onto Harry's. Three were angel food, one German chocolate.

Tonks let out a sound not unlike that of a cat purring before she tore into her cake, inhaling it at a pace that made even Harry raise his eyebrows.

"Impressive." He said, grinning, before picking up a fork and taking a sensible bit from each slice, carefully tasting each. After a few more tastes, he shrugged and stated, "I can't decide. Both taste heavenly."

After the kids had finished eating, Andromeda wrangled them into the living room. "Now then," she said, clapping her hands together. "We'll be traveling to The Leaky Cauldron via Floo Powder. Oh, don't worry, Harry, it's quite easy. Nymmy, you first."

Tonks grinned and grabbed a handful of the powder, then stepped into the fireplace. "If ya get dizzy easy, y'should prob'ly close your eyes while you're travelin'..." She said, winking at Harry before clearing her throat and saying, "The Leaky Cauldron!" At the same time, she threw the Powder down and was immediately engulfed in green flames. In an instant, she was gone.

"See? It's simple. All you have to do is get enough Powder, stand in the fireplace, and clearly state the name of your destination as you throw the powder down. Make sure you say the destination very, very clearly, alright? Otherwise, who knows where you could pop out!" Andromeda said as Harry nervously grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and walked into the fireplace.

He closed his eyes and took a few steadying breaths before looking

to Andromeda. She smiled encouragingly at him. With one final breath, Harry threw the Powder down and called out, "The Leaky Cauldron!" The Powder struck the fireplace and the familiar green flames flared up around him.

He had never experienced anything so bizarre in all his life. Almost at once, Andromeda had faded from view and he found himself being whisked along at high speeds. The fireplaces of other Wizarding families flashed by so quickly that Harry couldn't look in on anyone. He understood why Tonks had warned him that he might do good to keep his eyes closed. He realized that his own body was rotating and, combined with the fireplaces soaring by, he found it to be a rather nausea-inducing journey.

But then it was over and he hurtled out of another fireplace, landing hard on his stomach. Tonks made a squeaking noise and rushed over to him, quickly tugging him out and to one side. Not a moment too soon, as Andromeda came tumbling out seconds later.

"Oh, good, you both made it." She said, coughing and brushing ash from her clothing. "Are you alright, Harry?"

Harry groaned and got to his feet. "Getting a bit tired of falling on my face, but... yeah, I'm fine."

Tonks giggled and steadied her friend as he wobbled once. Andromeda looked them over, then made a face. "The only problem with traveling via Floo, aside from the nausea, is that it gets your clothes completely filthy. Here, you two, face me." She said, pulling her wand.

After a cleansing spell had removed the soot from their robes, Andromeda led the two out through a door in the back of the busy pub, into a rather bland-looking alleyway. As Harry looked around at the trashcans piled to the brim with rubbish that seemed to be older than the pub itself, Tonks and her mother made their way over to what appeared to be a normal-looking brick wall.

"Look! I TOLD you it was him!"

"Blimey..."

Harry blinked, hearing unfamiliar voices coming from behind him. He turned to see a pair of startlingly old women gaping down at him from the doorway.

Their eyes slowly rose to his forehead.

And just as Andromeda had tapped the bricks in the wall in the correct order to open the passageway to Diagon Alley, both the women squealed like little girls.

"It is! It is! Ooh, Opal, go tell everyone!" One of them howled, clapping her hands together.

Harry backpedaled quickly, unsure of how, exactly, to deal with the mentally ill. He heard Andromeda let out a low groan. He was then grabbed by the shoulders, whirled about, and pushed through the newly-made opening in the brick wall.

Somehow managing to keep himself from landing on his face for the third time that day, Harry turned to see Andromeda fending off a small crowd of people. These people, mostly older men and women, all started trying to get past her when they got a good look at Harry's head.

The brick wall started closing in on itself and, as it did, Andromeda looked over her shoulder and called, "Dear, you and Nymmy get on to Gringotts - and keep a low profile about it! I'll catch up to you! It's just down the road a bit, you'll know it when you come to it!"

With that, Harry was staring at a quite-solid brick wall once more. From beside him, Tonks rolled her eyes. "Harry," she said as she peered down Diagon Alley, "I toldja - you're famous. Can't have people seein' who ya are - it'd cause a bit of a riot. C'mon, I can getcha to Gringotts before mum's dealt with that lot, I bet."

Harry turned around to gaze off down the Alley as well now. There were lots of men and women - and lots of children, it seemed - walking about as if it were perfectly normal for them to be in such an

odd place. Which, Harry mused as the two started walking, it probably was.

Harry reached up and adjusted his bangs a bit so they partially hid his scar. Tonks grinned from his side and murmured, "Once we hit Hogwarts, I'm gonna see for sure whether or not you're a Metamorphmagus like I am..."

"A what?" Harry asked.

"Oh, come on. Haven't you wondered how I keep changing my hair and eye color?" Tonks asked back, grinning.

"...Now that you mention it..."

Tonks smirked. "You saying how your hair kept growing back after you got it cut... well, that kinda reminded me o' how I learned I was one. Metamorphmagi have the ability to change their appearance, see. Can't learn it - it's somethin' ya hafta be born with... S'pretty rare, mum said once. Here, watch..."

Tonks shut her eyes for a moment and her hair took on the short, spiky, blonde look it had been when the two had first met. And when her eyes opened, they were as green as Harry's. "See?"

"Wow..." Harry said, eyebrows raised. "That's cool... you really think I can do that?"

Tonks shrugged. "Dunno. Mum won't lemme try an' teach ya at home... Said that if I wanted to do that, I'd hafta wait till we got to Hogwarts. So the first chance I get, I'm pullin' you aside so we can run some tests!"

"Sounds like a plan." Harry said, smiling.

The two continued walking at a leisurely pace, Harry looking around in wonder at the numerous places and people that were going by. He wanted to stop by every store to look inside and see what lurked within. But Tonks said they'd be dropping by a few of them for school things before they headed back home, so Harry kept his path.

Just as they were approaching a tall building of white marble, Andromeda came rushing up to them, panting heavily. Tonks raised an eyebrow and asked, "Run all the way, mum?"

"Yeah..." Andromeda said, trying to catch her breath. "Got rid o' those drunks from the Cauldron, too. Told 'em you weren't quite ready to be mobbed by people, Harry."

"Thanks..." Harry replied, eyes staring down at the ground.

"Right... Well, since we're here... c'mon, you two. In we go!" Andromeda said, straightening back up and ushering the children through the bronze front doors of the building. Upon entering, another set of doors met them. This time, however, they were made of silver and seemed to have something engraved on them. Harry tried to catch a look of it, but the trio were through them before he could.

"It said, in summary, 'Don't try stealing' - And it's good to heed the warning. The goblins are proud of their work on the vaults, see. Miles and miles of them underground. Not sure how deep they go, as our own isn't very far from the entrance... but I've heard tales of dragons guarding some of the lower vaults. They've even found skeletons laying inside vaults - victims of the goblins' macabre sense of security..." Andromeda explained as they crossed into a large chamber.

The bank was bustling with activity. Witches and wizards of all ages stood around, waited in lines, and were otherwise assisted by the staff. Harry tried not to stare as he watched the goblins work, but found it rather difficult.

"Ugly as sin, ain't they?" Tonks whispered into his ear.

Harry nodded slowly, then blinked and snapped his attention away from the numerous non-human employees.

The three made their way up to a free window, where a goblin with an especially long nose sat on the other side of. He stared down at Andromeda as she approached.

"We're here to withdraw some money to buy the children their school supplies." She stated, rummaging around in her robes as she spoke.

"Got yer key?" The goblin grumbled.

"Both of them." Andromeda replied, retrieving a pair of keys and holding them up. "One is for ours - number 302, the other is for Harry's - number 687."

The goblin's eyes widened just slightly and he tilted to better see Harry with. After a moment, he nodded and looked over his shoulder. "Ribbenclaw! Ge' o'er 'ere!" He shouted.

"I'm comin', I'm comin'..." Said the goblin named Ribbenclaw, scowling as he appeared from around a corner.

"Take these two to their vaults for withdrawals." The goblin at the window said.

Ribbenclaw muttered something that Harry couldn't quite understand, then motioned for the group to follow him. Andromeda put one hand on Harry's shoulder and the other on Tonks', getting them moving forward again. "C'mon, you two..."

Ribbenclaw led them to an empty cart. Once they had piled in, the goblin smiled evilly and grumbled, "Hold on tightly, now. Wouldn't want anyone fallin' out, now, would we?"

"Hang onto something!" Tonks cried out, grinning at Harry.

Blinking, Harry gripped the sides of the cart - just in time. It took off at a ridiculous rate of speed, barreling down and into a maze-like system of underground corridors.

Tonks let out a whistle, obviously enjoying the ride.

Harry's head was twisting every which way to try and take in all of the surroundings. All he could see were the walls as they flew along, though.

He was unprepared for the sudden stop the cart made, however, and was promptly slung forward. His forehead cracked against the front of the cart. "OWW!" Harry exclaimed, groaning and flopping backwards, rubbing his forehead. "This just isn't my day." He muttered darkly.

"You okay?" Tonks asked, eyebrows raised. "Sorry 'bout that - prob'ly shoulda said something about the abrupt stops."

"Yeah. Probably." Harry echoed, scowling.

Andromeda hopped out of the cart with Ribbenclaw and the goblin opened the vault up. While he was waiting, Harry peered off in each direction the tracks went, trying to see anything interesting. Beside him, Tonks stretched and yawned. "Hey, Harry, d'ya know anything 'bout our kinda money?"

"Wizards use different currency?"

"Oh yeah. But it's simple." Tonks said, proceeding to explain the Knuts, sickles, and galleons to Harry, who occasionally glanced off into the Tonks' vault.

"It's easier than it sounds." Tonks finished, smirking slightly.

"I hope so." Harry replied.

Ribbenclaw and Andromeda came back after closing the vault up again.

"Vault 687 next. Hold on tight." The goblin said, his voice still darkly amused.

Harry spent the majority of the ride to his vault rubbing his neck, which had jerked back suddenly upon takeoff. Tonks giggled as he muttered several unflattering things about goblin transportation under his breath.

"Ere we go. This way, Mr. Potter." Ribbenclaw said after they had arrived. Harry hopped out of the cart, as did Tonks, who was eager to

see what kind of financial situation her friend was in.

Both gaped when the goblin opened it up.

"Sweet Merlin..." Tonks said, eyes wide. "You're famous AND you're rich?!"

Harry walked into the vault, mouth still open as he looked over the piles and piles of Knuts, sickles, and galleons in his vault. Not to mention several other objects that Harry couldn't identify. Whatever they were, they looked quite valuable and, despite he being the only Potter left alive, he didn't want to mess with any of them.

"Here, lemme help ya." Tonks said, helpfully. She swiped the bag that Ribbenclaw had given Harry upon their arrival, scooping up several handfuls of each type of coin and depositing them into the bag. She chucked it to Harry when she finished and he stared down at it.

"I've never even had pocket change before." He said simply as Tonks steered him back into the cart.

"Your family was quite well-off, Harry." Andromeda said, grinning at him as the two children sat back down. "You won't have to worry about being broke any time soon. Just remember to spend in moderation. It has to last through seven years of Hogwarts schooling and up until you can get yourself a job."

Andromeda offered to hold Harry's moneybag, but Harry insisted that he was fine with holding onto it himself. The whole way back up, Harry was quiet, his attention fully on the first bit of money he had ever owned.

Near the end of their trip, their cart nearly collided with another. Both grinded to a halt and the goblins steering them hopped out to yell at one another. It wasn't until Harry heard Andromeda talk that his attention was pulled away from his moneybag.

"Rubeus! What are you doing here? I thought you hated the cart rides!"

Harry looked over to the other cart and was gaping for the second time in five minutes. Before him was the largest man he had ever seen. If, indeed, he was a man at all. He looked too big to be allowed, for one thing. His face was hidden behind a positive mane of wild, black hair and he was wearing a perfectly ugly pale-green suit. The color seemed to match that of his cheeks.

"On business from Dumbledore, I am." The large man said, a hand near his mouth. "An' I DON' like these carts. Motion sickness an' all. Been sayin' they ough'a get a better way o' transport, but...goblins is goblins, af'er all..."

"What kind of business?" Andromeda asked. "Or can you not say?"

"Can' say." The man replied, straightening himself up a bit. The green in his cheeks faded a bit. "Sen' me down 'ere on top secre' business. Can' say a word ter anybody. ...You 'ave another kid there, Andromeda?"

Harry slouched slightly as the man's gaze moved from Tonks' mother to him.

"Hm? Oh! No, no...This, my dear gameskeeper, is Harry Potter." Andromeda said with a smile. "He's here for the first time – we were just on the way back from our vaults. Harry, this is Rubeus Hagrid - he's the gameskeeper for Hogwarts!"

"N...Nice to meet you..." Harry said softly, eyes not meeting Hagrid's. He inwardly cursed himself for the on-again/off-again stuttering around people he wasn't familiar with.

"Blimey..." Hagrid breathed, leaning forward in the cart to get a better look. "Izzit really 'im? ...Las' I saw you, you was jus' a baby, 'Arry... brought ye to them Muggle relatives o' yers m'self, I did... Dumbledore's orders. 'E knew as soon as IT happened, o' course...sent me righ' o'er ter yer mum an' dad's place..." The man looked close to sobbing. He sucked in a sharp breath through his nose, which made a rattling noise.

Harry's shoulders went rigid at the mention of his aunt and uncle.

Tonks saw it and quickly put a hand on Harry's back to try and relax him. Andromeda seemed to sense that the conversation had taken a turn for the worse, as well.

"Well, it's been wonderful seeing you again, Rubeus... but we really MUST get going if we're to get back before lunch!" Andromeda said, making sure to speak a bit louder on the final part. It did its job, causing Ribbenclaw to look over from where he was still arguing with the other goblin. With a sneer, he started his way back to their cart and climbed in.

"Righ'...I gotta ge' back t'Hogwarts soon, m'self. Good seein' yer all! 'Specially you, 'Arry! Take care o' yerselves, you lot!" Hagrid said, smiling at them as the goblin to his own cart returned.

And in a matter of seconds, the carts had parted ways once again.

"Harry, are you okay?" Andromeda asked in a worried tone.

"I'm fine." Replied Harry, his voice quiet. "...I'd just rather not be reminded of...of them..."

Andromeda put an arm around his shoulders, as did Tonks. Harry kept his eyes down on his moneybag for the rest of the trip back up into Gringotts. After securing their keys once more, Andromeda led the two for the exit. As they walked, Harry caught sight of the large man named Rubeus Hagrid stumbling out from wherever his own cart had ended up. A slight chill ran down Harry's spine and, suddenly, he felt like he would have rather been anywhere but Gringotts.

Chapter 5 – Silver Blood

"You've been awfully quiet, Harry. Are you sure you're alright?"

Harry let out a sigh. Ever since they had left Gringotts, both Tonks women had been pestering him to see if he was, in fact, NOT going to have a nervous breakdown. Every ten seconds.

Harry forced a smile and nodded. "I'm fine. Really... look, let's get shopping, shall we? It'll help take my mind off of remembering... remembering things I'd rather not."

Andromeda and Tonks exchanged a glance, but the former nodded.

"Well, the first place we're going to go is Ollivander's." Andromeda said, pointing the kids in the right direction. "We'll pick up your wands there!"

Harry shook his head and grinned, despite himself. It was still strange to him to think that witches and wizards really DID carry magic wands about.

Ollivander's, as it turned out, was an odd place, indeed. It appeared, when they had entered the building, that no one was there. Harry saw shelves upon shelves of small boxes kept behind the register, but didn't see anyone around to man the thing. That is, until Andromeda hit the service bell on the counter. Seemingly out of thin air, an old man with grayed hair appeared. He looked first to Andromeda, then to Tonks, then to Harry, where his gaze lingered momentarily.

"Andromeda Tonks? Oak, ten and one-quarter inches, strangely flexible, with a single unicorn hair." He said, his attention back on Andromeda. She grinned and nodded at him.

"I'll never understand how you remember things so well." Andromeda said to him, causing him to smile faintly.

"I remember EVERY wand I sell, Ms. Tonks. Now, what may I do for you today?" Ollivander asked.

"We're here to pick up wands for Nymmy and Harry." She replied.

"Don't call me 'Nymmy.'" Tonks muttered darkly.

Without another word, Mr. Ollivander vanished into the rows of boxes behind the register. The trio waited for at least a minute before he returned with a box in tow. He opened it up and took out the wand, smiling as he held it towards Tonks. "Willow, nine and a half inches, rigid, with a dragon's heartstring."

"Go on, Nymmy." Andromeda coaxed, smiling at her daughter. "Give it a try."

"Yes, just give it a swish and let's see what happens." Ollivander said.

With a slightly-nervous look to Harry, Tonks took the wand from Mr. Ollivander. She gave it a good flick. Nothing happened. Ollivander quickly snatched the wand away from her, placed it back within its box, and scampered off to search for another one. Tonks and Harry raised eyebrows at this rather strange behavior.

"He's always been like that." Andromeda explained in a hushed voice. "The longer it takes to find an owner a wand, the happier he is."

And he was pleased indeed when it took over 12 wands and 20 minutes before Tonks finally found the one meant to be hers.

"Mahogany, 12 inches, springy. It also has a unicorn's tail hair inside of it." Ollivander said with an outright grin. The past few wands had had unicorn tail hairs for their cores. The man seemed to think that they were getting closer and closer.

When Tonks flicked this wand, it caused a whole row of wand boxes to collapse in upon itself. Tonks and Harry gasped audibly, Mr. Ollivander clapped his hands together, and Andromeda rolled her eyes at the scene before her.

"Excellent, excellent! Now then..." The old man turned towards Harry, getting an unreadable gleam in his eyes. "You... you shall be a

challenge,

I

think..."

If Mr. Ollivander had been pleased at the length of time it took to get Tonks' wand, he was certifiably giddy with the ridiculous amount of time it took to get Harry matched up.

Harry's wrist was getting sore. He had flicked and swished upwards of 45 wands before Mr. Ollivander tilted his head and surveyed the boy once more. "I wonder..." He began slowly. "...Yes, yes, it just might be..."

Before anyone could ask what 'might be,' the man was off, searching through his shelves of wands. When he came back, he did so carrying a box that looked positively ancient.

"Holly... Eleven inches... Supple... With a phoenix feather core. Try this one, Mr. Potter." Ollivander said, removing the lid and handing the wand to Harry.

Harry felt something almost at once. With the other wands, he had simply felt as if he were holding an ordinary piece of wood. But this... this felt as if something had been jumpstarted inside of his body. When he gave it a flick, a burst of blue light shot from the tip. It flew up, ricocheted off of the ceiling, and proceeded to fly back into the wand shelves, bouncing all over the place and knocking box after box off and to the floor.

Tonks cracked up. "You win, Harry! You did more damage than I did!"

"Very interesting..." Ollivander said, staring Harry down and ignoring the carnage raging on behind him. "Very interesting, indeed... yes..."

"Um... what's interesting...?" Harry asked after a moment under the wand supplier's stare.

"...It is very interesting, Mr. Potter... that you should become the owner of that particular wand. The phoenix that supplied the core of your wand gave only one other feather... yes, it is very interesting indeed...that you should own that wand... when its brother is the one that gave you that scar." Ollivander said darkly, his eyes flitting to

Harry's

forehead.

Harry heard both women gasp at this information, but it seemed to do little more than numb Harry all over. When he finally found his voice again, he managed to ask, "Y...you mean... that... that You-Know-Who..." Harry had learned over the course of his stay with the Tonks' to never said the dark wizard's name outright. "...That his wand..."

"Yes, Mr. Potter. It is, for all intents and purposes, the brother to the wand that has chosen you."

After Tonks had managed to snap Harry out of an internal discussion he was having with himself, he handed Mr. Ollivander seven galleons for his wand. Andromeda did the same for Tonks' wand. The three turned to leave the shop, Harry looking over his shoulder as they did so. Mr. Ollivander had a strange, unreadable expression on his face and, as soon as the door was closed behind them, Harry saw the man grab a quill from near the register.

"Well, now that THAT is over with..." Andromeda said in a slightly annoyed voice, "Why don't we find a place that isn't going to be full of people spoiling Harry's big day."

"What? Oh, oh, no... I'm fine... Really, I am. It's just... well, it's a lot to take in all at once, that's all." Harry said, his money bag pocketed safely inside of his robes. He had started twirling his wand around his fingers, being rather good at not letting it drop to the ground.

"If you say so, dear..." Andromeda said, not quite convinced at Harry's explanation. "Off to Madam Malkin's, then! Next thing we need are school robes!"

Or rather, Harry and Tonks did. Andromeda mentioned something about grabbing their schoolbooks while they were getting fitted. She then dropped them off and ran back up the street. Tonks rolled her eyes at this and claimed her mother just wanted to be back at home before noon rolled around.

Harry, who had never been formally fitted for his clothing, felt a bit nervous as the duo entered Madam Malkin's. Before he could look

around very much, however, a voice called out, "Hogwarts, dears?"

Harry turned to see a squat little witch smiling at himself and Tonks. He nodded in reply and she walked over to them. "Right this way, then. There's another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

And indeed there was. Madam Malkin led the two over near a young man with startlingly blonde hair. He turned his head upon hearing their footsteps. His eyes were slate gray, but seemed to have a flicker of silver that came and went. The silver in them came out as his eyes moved from Harry to Tonks and then back again. Madam Malkin lined Harry up next to the youth, with Tonks on his right. "Now then, this'll take just a minute!" She said.

"Hogwarts, too?" The blonde asked after a moment. He was still being fitted, as well, and looked rather bored with it. Once again, Harry nodded.

The blonde's eyes wandered to the ceiling. He let out an irritated sigh, then spoke again. "My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands..." His voice seemed to drawl when he spoke, as if he would rather be anywhere but where he actually was. "If I ever get out of this place, I think I'll drag them off to look at racing brooms...Personally, I don't see why first years can't have their own. Perhaps I could bully father into getting me one... Might be able to smuggle it in somehow."

Harry exchanged a glance with Tonks, who rolled her eyes and mouthed 'rich ponce' at him. Harry tried hard not to grin.

"Have YOU got your own broom?" The blonde suddenly asked, forcing Harry's attention back to the present.

"Um... n...no." Harry said, annoyed at his stutter's return.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No..." Harry replied, shooting Tonks a questioning look. Her eyes lit up, but she shook her head. He gave her a slight nod.

"Well, I do...father says it would be a crime if I didn't play for my house, and I agree... Do either of you know what house you'll be in?" The boy said, though his tone seemed to indicate that he couldn't care less.

"No." Harry and Tonks replied in unison.

"Well," the blonde replied, raising an eyebrow at the two. "No one really knows until they get there, do they? But I know I'll be in Slytherin. Everyone in my family has been, after all. Can't imagine being in Hufflepuff. I'd leave if I were placed there, wouldn't you?"

"You sure do talk a lot." Tonks said, her tone dry. "Like hearin' your own voice, do ya?"

The blonde narrowed his eyes at her, giving her a once-over. "And who, precisely, are you?"

"Tonks." Said Tonks.

"What kind of a name is 'Tonks'?" Replied the blonde, making a face.

"Well what's your name, then, it's so special?" Tonks asked with a huff.

"Malfoy. Draco Malfoy." Replied the blonde, tilting his chin up as he said it.

Tonks snorted.

"Think it's funny, do you?" Draco Malfoy asked, a sneer on his face.

"Too right, I do!" Tonks said, not bothering to hide her grin. "I've heard about your family. Izzit true your mother and father are really sister and brother? Hate t'be in your shoes, then. Gettin' stuck with all those bad genes an' all." Tonks said, making a vague gesture with one hand. "But I s'pose we all can't be royalty, eh?"

Draco looked livid. But it passed in a moment and he quickly composed himself, looking down his nose at the girl. "I'll have you

know that my family is one of the wealthiest pureblooded Wizarding families in all of Britain." He said, cockily.

"Oh, yeah, it shows." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "And I bet you've been pampered all your life, right? How're you ever gonna get on at Hogwarts? Gonna get other people t'do your homework?"

The air of importance vanished in an instant and Draco sneered at Tonks. "I'll have you know that my father could probably buy and sell you, your friend, and whatever parents you have in an instant! He's very powerful and not one to be trifled with! OWW!" The blonde looked down to where he had been stuck with a floating safety pin. From across the room, Madam Malkin looked up and called over, "Be still, dear!"

Draco still glared at Tonks, however, and finally hissed, "You wait and see. Once I tell him what happened, you'll be out on the streets! My father always gets what he wants - ALWAYS! You'll pay for insulting me! We'll see how you act when you've only got the rats in the alleys as company! Not that you don't already look like that's where you came from. I've never seen someone with such hideous hair! Your family not have the skill to fix it, you ugly little girl?!"

At that moment, Harry couldn't quite place what was happening inside of him. He had been the target of numerous arguments, but rarely had he sat and watched from the outside of one. And now that his first and only real friend was being insulted and outright threatened, something had changed. He had never struck back when Dudley and his gang had beaten him up - he had been outnumbered and would suffer later, even if he got a punch in. It wasn't that he didn't know HOW to fight back - he did. He had been on the receiving end of more attack maneuvers than he cared to recall. His body had learned to heal itself quickly after being injured - something, he now thought, must have had to do with his magical nature.

Harry didn't feel his hand bunching up into a fist. He didn't feel his arm pull back. And he didn't feel it flying forward. All he felt was the satisfying CRACK it made when it connected to the blonde's jaw, followed by the THUD made by Draco Malfoy hitting the ground.

For a moment, silence rang deafeningly inside of Madam Malkin's. Draco looked stunned, as if he had never quite seen - or felt - anything so strange in his life. He brought a hand up to his jaw and looked up at Harry. For a moment, their eyes locked, then Draco's moved up. He saw the scar. His eyes widened, then narrowed down to slits.

Harry wasn't quite sure how Dudley's gang did it. His knuckles were hurting something fierce, and his whole hand felt numb. It was slowly wearing off, giving way to a tingling sort of ache. But he glared down at the blonde and, through clenched teeth, growled, "Don't you DARE threaten her."

"Good heavens, what are you two doing?!" Madam Malkin exclaimed, rushing over and kneeling to examine Draco. "Fighting in my shop! Children these days have no respect! Are you alright, dear?"

"Fine." Draco Malfoy hissed. Harry noticed his mouth didn't open very far, and he had winced when it had. The blonde quickly got to his feet and stared at Harry for a moment longer before turning as gracefully as someone who just got clobbered possibly could, heading straight out of the robe shop.

"And you! What could have pos-- ...good lord." Madam Malkin began, turning on Harry. But her eyes also flitted to his forehead. His bangs had been moved to one side as he had thrown the punch, leaving his scar perfectly exposed. "...Are you...?"

Harry blinked. He wondered if ALL of the people he would meet in the Wizarding world would react as strangely as the people he had met so far. "Um... I... I'm Harry Potter, if...if that's what you meant. I'm...I'm really sorry, ma'am... But...But he was... he threatened my friend and... and..." Harry trailed off, idly rubbing his sore hand.

Madam Malkin just seemed to nod blankly, then smiled and waved a hand. Almost at once, her cheerful expression reappeared. "Quite alright, dear. I'm sure he'll return later. He DOES need to finish being fitted, after all. Shouldn't be much longer for the two of you, though!"

And with that, the owner went back to where she had been – sitting

behind the register and reading what appeared to be a newspaper... one with a moving picture on the front page.

"Damn," Harry swore under his breath as he looked down at his hand for the first time. His knuckles, along with the parts of his fingers that had connected to Malfoy's face, were red. They were also throbbing rather well at this point. "Not gonna do that again..."

When, at last, he looked over to Tonks, he found her gaping at him. Frowning, he asked, "...What?"

"..."

"Oi, Tonks... you alright?"

"...Did you just punch Draco Malfoy in the jaw?!" Tonks asked slowly.

"...Well yeah! He...he was insulting you and... and stuff."

"You just punched Draco Malfoy in the jaw... for me?" Tonks asked again.

"Um...yeah, I guess I did..."

Tonks stared for a moment longer before letting out a laugh and shaking her head. "Never knew ya had it in ya! That was a right sight t'see, Harry. The look on his face after he hit the floor was priceless!"

"Not sure what came over me..." Harry said, feeling slightly embarrassed now that the whole thing had ended. "I just... I just couldn't listen to him talk like that anymore."

"Aww, my hero!" Tonks said, changing her eyelashes to a ridiculous length before batting them at Harry.

Harry laughed, though he couldn't fight the faint blush that had crept onto his cheeks. Tonks must have seen it, as she proceeded to shorten her eyelashes back to normal length and ask in a sweet voice, "So...does that mean you don't think I'm ugly, then?"

"What?" Harry asked, blinking at her, his blush creeping up. Her hair, as it so often did, had changed at some point when Harry hadn't been looking. It was curly, light green, and hung down to her shoulders. Her eyes were a sky blue color that seemed to almost glow when the light hit them just right.

"Um...no, I guess not... ...I'm sure you could be if you TRIED, but I don't think I want my best friend to look like one of those... what did you call them? Hags?" Harry asked, brow creasing as he tried to remember.

Tonks blinked at him, then doubled over in giggles. It took her a minute to compose herself again, but when she did, she grinned evilly at him and said, "I'll have to try that sometime. Maybe right before I wake you up, eh? That oughta getcha outta bed pretty fast."

"Don't you dare." Harry replied.

"Done!"

Harry and Tonks both turned to look at Madam Malkin, who was walking towards them and holding a piece of parchment. "Now then, how would you like to be paying?"

"My mum should be back soon." Tonks said, looking back towards the door. "Dunno what's takin' her so long."

Right on cue, Andromeda showed up, though she looked somewhat baffled. Walking over to where Harry, Tonks, and Madam Malkin were standing, she asked, "Did something just happen in here? I passed by Narcissa Malfoy on my way back here, and she looked close to having kittens."

Tonks cracked up.

Harry lowered his gaze and blushed.

The trio left Madam Malkin's after paying and, with bags full of books and other school supplies, headed back up the Alley and towards the brick wall that lead into The Leaky Cauldron. As they did, Harry was

forced to listen to Tonks replay the events that had occurred inside of Madam Malkin's. It was thoroughly embarrassing.

"And after he said THAT, Harry got this faraway look in his eyes for a second, then WHAM! Malfoy was on his rear end, lookin' down an' out shocked. Harry really laid him out good, he did!" Tonks gushed, grinned and throwing an imitation punch.

Andromeda was shaking her head. "Honestly. What am I going to do with you two? Though a part of me does think he deserved what he got, if what you said is true, Nymmy. As rich as their family is, you'd think they could teach the boy some manners." There was a pause, then Andromeda grinned. "And I believe I just thought of what I had forgot!"

She got them back to the brick wall, set their bags of supplies on the ground, then turned to run off again. "I'll be right back! You two stay there!"

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked to Tonks, who just shrugged.

When Andromeda returned minutes later, it was to Tonks trying to teach Harry about Quidditch.

"...So then the...Chasers? They take the Quaffle...and try and get it past the Keeper?" Harry asked, trying to keep track of players and balls.

"Yup!" Tonks replied, smiling.

"Okay... And then the Beaters whack about the bludgers and try and screw everybody up. And the Seeker tries finding...what was it, again?"

"The golden snitch."

"Right, the golden snitch...which nets their team one hundred and fifty points and ends the game?"

"Exactly!"

"...Seems kind of unbalanced to me." Harry said with a frown. "I mean, if the Seeker found the snitch right away, it'd be an instant win. It must be really hard to see and catch..."

"Oh, yeah, it... oh, wow! Harry, look at that!" Tonks said, her attention moving from Harry to something else. Harry followed her gaze to see Andromeda watching them with an amused look on her face. Under one arm, she was toting a cage with a beautiful, snow white owl.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" She said, holding the cage out to him.

Harry knew, after the time he had been spending at the Tonks' house, that wizards used owls to receive and deliver letters to one another, but he had never seen one as beautiful as this one. Taking the cage from her, his mouth open in surprise, he gazed at the owl, who looked back at him curiously.

"It's a girl." Andromeda added before Harry could think up a name either way. "And don't try and say you can't accept it." She said, catching that look in Harry's eyes that meant he was about to try and decline something. She had learned well of it when she had started conjuring robes for him.

"Come on, you two. Harry, you can think of a name on the way. I want to get home and get some lunch into me. Running up and down Diagon Alley all morning's made me a bit hungry." Andromeda said, picking up a couple of bags again after tapping the right bricks in the wall to cause it to open.

"Whatcha gonna call her?" Tonks asked quietly as the two trailed after the older woman.

"I...I dunno. Sorry, girl... can you let me sleep on it?" Harry asked the owl, who offered a soft hoot in response. Harry hoped this meant that she would.

"Snow White?" Tonks offered as they re-entered The Leaky Cauldron. "Snowy? No, wait, that's more a dog's name, isn't it? Umm...Flaky? Crystal? Icicle? Corn Flakes!"

"Corn Flakes?" Harry and Andromeda asked at the same time, casting strange looks at Tonks, who blushed and looked off, muttering something quietly.

"My daughter, the nutter." Andromeda said, letting out a melodramatic sigh. "Tom!" She then called out to the bartender, who turned her way. "We'll be Flooing home. I'll leave the money on the table nearest the fireplace, if that's alright."

Tom, the bartender, grinned (if you could call it that) and nodded at Andromeda, then went back to serving the customers. All of whom kept sneaking glances at Harry. He was, therefore, grateful that Andromeda decided to let him go first.

"I'll go let your owl out before I go. Can't Floo with animals, I'm afraid. She'll be able to find you, though." Andromeda had explained as he grabbed a handful of Powder and stepped into the fireplace. As he looked from Andromeda to Tonks to his first ever real birthday present, he couldn't help but grin. Despite the run-ins with Hagrid and Malfoy, it was turning out to be Harry's best birthday ever. Something, he hoped as he found himself whizzing past the fireplaces of other Wizarding families and businesses, that would continue until he closed his eyes and fell asleep that night.

Chapter 6 – Spiders and Fame

"Are you sure your knuckles are gonna heal alright, Harry? You really didn't hafta slug that blonde idiot for me, y'know. Probably woulda done it myself...if I had been closer, I mean."

Tonks was sitting on the couch in the living room of her house, frowning at Harry, who was rubbing his knuckles slowly and pulling a face. It had been nearly a week since their trip into Diagon Alley had taken place, and Harry's knuckles were still aching from time to time. Andromeda had dismissed it as his body simply not being used to hitting someone.

"Much as I would have loved seeing you deck that git, Tonks," Harry began, smirking up at her, "I think you'll get plenty of chances once we get to Hogwarts."

Tonks pursed her lips, then beamed and nodded. "Good thinkin'! First chance I get, I'm waffling the blonde ponce with a toilet seat!"

"A toilet seat?" Harry repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Tonks shrugged. "Think about how funny it'd be!"

Harry tilted his head back so that it rested against the couch and his eyes glazed over for a moment. Slowly, a grin spread across his face. "You know, I think you're right. Go for it."

The two sat there for a moment before Harry let out a sigh.

"Wha's wrong?" Tonks asked.

"It's just..." Harry waved a hand around, searching for the right words. "...I want to do something about the Dursley's." He said after a moment. "I want to do something before leaving for Hogwarts, but I don't know what. I mean... they don't approve of imagination, and here I am - a wizard."

Harry paused and, as if something was just dawning on him, his eyes

went wide. "...And my Aunt Petunia must have known all this time."
He said, voice quiet.

"Did she? Whyzat?" Tonks asked, brow creasing.

"Well, my mum was a witch, wasn't she? My aunt certainly isn't. In fact, that's probably why they all hate me - I'm a reminder of my mum... who she probably hated for being 'different' than she was." Harry said, a faint growl in the back of his throat.

Tonks hmmed, then smiled. "Think I could talk mum into conjuring about a hundred toilet seats and send 'em flying towards your relatives?"

Harry snorted. "As much as I'd love seeing a toilet seat collide with Dudley's face, I doubt we could manage something like that. But..." Harry licked his lips. "But what if... what if we went back on the grounds that I wanted to get something... and just happened to have our wands with us? I mean, my aunt **MUST** have known my mum was a witch... so she knows about the Wizarding world. And if she knows about **THAT...**"

"Then she'll probably be scared out of her knickers if she saw a wand?" Tonks finished.

"Exactly."

"I'm a bad influence." Tonks said with a proud grin. "Look atcha, Harry! Plotting revenge on those awful Muggles! Wouldn't 'a done **THAT** when we first met."

"Yeah... but now I know the truth. A truth they kept from me. Said my parents died in a car wreck... that that's where I got my scar from." Harry said, darkly. "I know your mum said that we can't do magic outside of school - not that I know any, yet... - but it couldn't hurt to put that fear into 'em, could it? Make **THEM** scared for once?"

"Not in the least!" Tonks replied, throwing an arm around Harry's shoulders. "So when d'ya wanna pull off this amazing plan to make your relatives wet themselves, eh?"

"As soon as possible."

And, in this way, Harry and Tonks found themselves walking the short distance to Privet Drive. Harry was wearing a pair of black trousers and a black top that had red trim to it. Tonks was dressed similarly; her hair short and spiky, just as it had been on the day the two had first met.

"So, did you really get stuck in a cupboard under the stairs all these years?" Tonks asked, hands in her pockets.

Harry nodded, eyes narrowing slightly. "Yeah...the spiders were my only friends. They actually managed to save me from a few beatings by Dudley's gang. I'd let a few travel with me on days I was sure that I was going to get cornered. It was like they KNEW that I needed their help or something, because they always knew just when to scurry out of my clothes and onto theirs..."

"In harmony with the creepy-crawlies, huh? Wonder how Malfoy'd take to having spiders in his hair..."

Harry cracked a grin. "Add that to the list of stuff we should do to him once we learn how."

"Noted." Tonks said, winking. "So, what're we gonna say you're back for, eh?"

"Dunno. I could just say I wanted to free the remaining spiders... which I do, kinda. I certainly don't want them to get killed or anything." Harry said, eyeballing Number Four as it came into view. "Could just say I forgot that some of them were still in there."

"Works for me." Tonks said, shrugging slightly. "Long as we get to see them all spooked out, I'm happy. They deserve worse than that for all they did t'ya..."

"Oh, I plan on it. Just...after a few years of schooling." Harry replied, smirking. "Right, here we are. If they're up to snuff, the front door's unlocked and we can go right in. What time is it, anyway?"

"Well, it was a bit past noon when we left. Maybe twelve-thirty right now?"
Tonks replied.

"Then...Uncle Vernon will probably be in the kitchen. Aunt Petunia will be cooking - which ought to be hilarious, since I know she can't cook a thing - and Dudley will be on the couch, staring dumbly at the television, as per usual." Harry said, ticking off relatives on his fingers. "You ready?"

"Ready, willing, and able, chief."

Harry grinned, grasped the doorknob, and threw the door open.

Steeling himself, Harry called out, "I'm home!"

The reaction was marvelously fast, all things considered. Dudley tripped on his way out into the downstairs hall and fell flat on his face in the doorway to the living room. At the same time, Vernon came roaring in from the kitchen, barely missing Dudley as he did. Petunia brought up the rear, holding a long, wooden spoon with what could have been spaghetti sauce on it.

"YOU! HOW DARE YOU SHOW YOUR FACE IN MY HOUSE AGAIN!" Vernon roared, the gleam in his eyes unmistakable. Harry had seen it every time he had been slung about and beaten. For a moment, his muscles locked up. Sensing his brief pause, Tonks got things rolling.

"Keep it down, ya dirty great barge! Th'whole neighborhood'll hear ya! Not that you don't already take up a good neighborhood's worth o' space already, mind, but tha's entirely beside the point." She said quickly, tapping her chin with a finger.

"And who the devil are you?!" Vernon growled, eyes moving from Harry to Tonks.

"His girlfriend!" Dudley spat, sounding thoroughly disgusted. Both Harry and Tonks blushed faintly at this, reminded of the time that she had helped him escape.

"Girlfriend?!" Vernon repeated, sounding even more disgusted. "So THAT'S where you went, is it?! Frolicking around with some little harlot while we starve?!"

"Harlot?!" Tonks said, sounding affronted.

"You've got some bloody nerve showing your face around here, boy!" Vernon growled, eyes moving back to Harry now.

"I won't be staying long." Harry said quietly, though his voice carried a hardened edge to it. Though he wanted to do SOMETHING to his uncle in response to his insulting Tonks, he knew perfectly well that trying to throw a punch would be suicide. "Just came to get something out of my 'room'..."

"What, an old sock?" Dudley asked, mockingly.

Harry paid him no mind and, making sure to keep his wand concealed, walked up to and past his aunt and uncle. He opened the door to his former room and leaned inside.

While he was doing this, Tonks took the opportunity to have a bit of fun. "So," She began, looking at Dudley, who was still in a prone position. "You plan to get back up, or do you need a crane to help with that? Stuck, are you?"

Dudley's face went red. He got to his feet as quickly as he could - a sight that made Tonks force back laughter - and glared at the girl. "Stop making fun of me!" He growled, warningly. "Or else!"

"Or else what?" Tonks asked, raising an eyebrow. "You'll beat me up like you beat Harry up?"

"That's right!" Dudley said, smiling viciously.

"Oi, Harry, hurry it up. Your colossal cousin over here said he'd smack me around a bit!" Tonks called, voice uncaring. From inside the cupboard, Harry called back, "Almost done!"

He reappeared a moment later, looking no different than he did when he stepped inside. All three Dursleys' noticed this. Therefore, they didn't pay much attention when Harry 'accidentally' brushed against them when he walked back over toward Tonks.

"What'd you get, then? Old air?" Dudley asked, looking Harry up and down, trying to figure out if he actually had taken something.

Harry just smiled. "No, I was doing a bit of...spring cleaning, I guess you could say. I had to get them out of there before you lot got to them, see. But six of them, they seemed like they'd agree to helping me out with something."

"What ARE you talking about?!" Vernon roared, face turning purple.

"I'm talking about the garden spiders crawling up your legs right now." Harry replied blandly.

The trio of Dursleys' reacted as one, looking down and then having fits, trying to get the rapidly-crawling arachnids off of them any way possible. After a few minutes of entertainment, Harry called out, "Okay, you lot! That's enough! Come on, get over here before they really do get a good shot at you!"

It took a moment, but the spiders neatly hopped to the ground and quickly scurried over and past Harry. They quickly made their way out the still-open front door and, presumably, to freedom. Vernon looked murderous. "I don't care if your little harlot friend IS with you, when I get my hands on you, I'll...!"

"You'll do NOTHING!" Harry growled. And, in unison, he and Tonks withdrew their wands from their hiding places. Petunia screamed, bolting back into the kitchen faster than Harry had ever seen her move. Dudley looked confused, but Vernon looked almost as spooked as his wife had sounded.

"W...Where did you get those?!" He demanded, eyeballing the wands very carefully.

"Diagon Alley." Harry replied casually. "See, Tonks and her mum

were kind enough to explain what REALLY happened to my parents. And of what I really was. I'll be going to Hogwarts come September. You DO know what that is, don't you?"

Vernon developed a twitch in his eyes as he hissed, "It's where that FREAK sister of Petunia's met that FREAK Potter boy! It's where you people go to learn to train your...your abnormalities!"

"Did he just call us abnormal?" Tonks asked.

"Believe so." Harry replied.

"Wanna hex him?"

"I'd love to."

It was quickly becoming a Dursley family record-breaking day, as Vernon up and retreated to the kitchen faster than Petunia had.

"You two are loony!" Dudley said, not understanding why his parents were so frightened of pieces of wood.

"Not loony, 'Duddykins,'" Harry said, voice dark. "Wizards. You won't be pushing me around any more."

"Wizards?!" Dudley repeated, making a face. "There's no such thing as wizards, you idiot."

"Then why did your parents have such a fit when they saw our wands?" Tonks asked, smiling pleasantly.

"I..." Dudley began. But he couldn't find any reason why they WOULD have escaped so quickly. "You two are loony!" He repeated again, pointing an accusatory finger at Harry. "Completely mental! What'd you do to her, anyway?!"

"...What?" Harry asked, completely caught off-guard at the random question.

"I asked you what you did to her to make her hang out with you!"

Dudley said, sneering. "You musta done something. No normal person would be around you."

"Not listening, tubby?" Tonks asked, raising her eyebrows. "We AREN'T normal! We're wizards!"

"Come on, you don't want to be around HIM." Dudley said to Tonks, jerking a thumb in Harry's direction. "You should come and hang around with me an' my friends. Hanging out with HIM'S just gonna get you hurt."

"Harry, I don't think he's listening." Tonks said.

"Nothing unusual about that." Harry replied. "He never does."

Dudley gritted his teeth, getting rather annoyed. "What's wrong with you, you... you HARLOT?" He growled at Tonks, using the term his father had.

Vernon Dursley would have been suicide to hit. Dudley Dursley, on the other hand, didn't quite have the layers upon layers of fat to protect him fully.

"Get him." Harry hissed quietly.

From within Harry's clothes, dozens of small spiders appeared. Dudley recoiled and crashed back into the wall. Harry knew quite well that his cousin was deathly afraid of spiders, and he planned to use that to his advantage.

"Dudley, Dudley," Harry said, sounding rather bored as he walked over toward his cousin, the spiders keeping one step behind him. "You shouldn't insult people. Especially girls. ...Especially girls I'm friends with."

"Sh...shut up, you freak..." Dudley whimpered, backpedaling towards the door to the kitchen. "Get your spiders and that harlot out of here!"

"You probably don't even know what the word 'harlot' means, you daft sod." Harry said in an exasperated voice. "You shouldn't use words

you don't use. For goodness sake, Dudley, you're already an idiot,
you don't need HELP."

Eyeballing the spiders carefully, Dudley got to his feet and did what he did best - blindly charged for Harry with fists flying.

The spiders flew forward immediately, getting onto his socks and crawling their way up into his pants. While this was happening, Harry was easily dodging the wide-open, telegraphed punches that Dudley was trying to hit him with. Years of getting beaten up, if nothing else, had increased his agility. Between the running and the dodging, he got quite good at not being punched. At least, as long as it was only Dudley coming after him.

"Don't -- call -- my -- friend --" Harry said, ducking and twisting between each word to get out of the way of more punches. "A -- HARLOT!"

Harry ducked upon saying the final word, a straight-on jab grazing across the hair on the top of his head. In prime position to strike back, finally, Harry hissed, "Bite!" and then balled his right hand up into a fist.

Seconds before Harry's hand connected to the bottom of Dudley's jaw, the fat youth let out a girlish shriek of pain and toppled over backwards. Harry, not expecting such quick movement from his cousin, missed the uppercut entirely and was sent spinning for a brief moment. When he regained his balance, he noticed Dudley writhing around on the floor, hands firmly clutched to the front of his pants. Seconds later, a small army of spiders came scurrying out of his clothing.

"What just happened?" Tonks asked, slightly confused.

As Harry lead the spiders out of Number Four, he grinned at his friend. "Well, I guess the spiders got higher than I thought they would have."

"...They bit his pink bits?!" Tonks asked, her voice higher than normal.

Harry nearly doubled over in laughter. "'Pink bits'?" He asked, making sure the last of the spiders was safely out. Tonks blushed.

"Um...that's what mum said to use when talkin' 'bout...well, that area..." She mumbled, looking anywhere but at Harry, who was all but giggling at that point.

Tonks hopped out of Number Four and Harry closed the door behind her. As they set off back towards Tonks' house, Harry mused aloud, "Number three on the Prank Malfoy list - do something to his...'pink bits.'" He then proceeded to crack up again. And, after the mental image hit her, Tonks joined him.

As they walked back towards Fenshank Lane, Harry crossed his arms behind his head and smiled. Tonks watched him for a moment before asking, "What're you so happy about, then, eh?"

"Hm? Oh... just... getting away from them, that's all." Harry said. "Eleven years being kicked about... and I'm finally FREE. ...Free and rather wealthy, to boot. You have no idea how strange it all feels to me..."

"So what's on tap for the rest of the day?" Tonks asked.

"Dunno. I suppose I could work out the name of my owl..." Harry said, eyebrows raised. "I really should give her a name, after all."

"Moony?" Suggested Tonks.

"Moony?" Repeated Harry.

"Yeah! Y'know... 'cause the moon's kinda white an' all." Tonks said, gesturing upward.

"I don't think so." Harry replied, making a face. "Makes me think of someone dropping trou..."

"What?"

"Wizards don't moon people? Huh. I only know about it because I

once caught Dudley mooning poor Mrs. Guffal across the way... she looked like she was about t'be ill. Can't say I blame her, though. If I saw Dudley's rear end in all its glory, I'd feel nauseous, too." Harry said, shuddering.

"Thanks for that mental image, mate." Tonks said, sticking out her tongue and shuddering as well. "That'll replace the whale in my nightmare."

"I fail to see how that makes it any different. They're both the same size..." Harry said, smirking faintly.

"Quiet, you."

When they entered Number Nine, the two ran off upstairs and into the guest bedroom - which Tonks had officially dubbed Harry's room. Harry sat on the edge of the bed. Tonks, on the other hand, flung herself onto it and stretched out.

After awhile, Harry flopped back and looked over at his best friend. Tonks' eyes were closed and her breathing was slow and deep. Quietly, so as not to wake her if she were sleeping, Harry asked, "Tonks? You fall asleep?"

"Nah..." Her reply came, lazily. "Just thinkin'..."

"About what?"

"'Bout Hogwarts, mainly."

"Anything in particular about Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

"Not really, but..." Tonks paused, then opened her eyes (they were a cat-like yellow) and looked at Harry. "What if we get sorted into different houses? I mean...I want to still hang out an' stuff after we get there. But if we get sorted into different houses, we'd only be able t'see each other during our free time... what fun is that?"

"How does the sorting work, anyway?" Harry asked, tilting his head slightly.

"I'm not sure. Mum wouldn't tell me... she said it was more fun to keep it a surprise. She did say there was nothing to worry about - that it was easy enough. But even so..." Tonks said, staring up at the ceiling now. "I dunno, maybe I'm worryin' for no good reason, but... I'd reckon that prat Malfoy gets sorted into Slytherin. Like he said, his whole family's been there... Oh, I hope you don't get sorted into Slytherin, too, Harry..."

"Why?"

"Why?! 'Cause then I'd try gettin' put there, too. An' no offense, Harry, but having to see Malfoy day in, day out wouldn't be worth it."

"Agreed." Harry said, staring up at the ceiling now, as well. "What house was your mum in?"

"Ravenclaw. She's right smart when she wants to be." Tonks said with a smile. "She's told me stories about sittin' around their common room an' playing games with her friends 'till all hours of the night..."

"Sounds like fun..."

"Yeah. Wonder what the ride's gonna be like..."

"Right?"

Tonks blinked. "Oh, that's right... Don't think I've toldja 'bout the Express yet."

"The Express?" Harry asked, getting tired of asking so much in one sitting.

"Yeah! Mum said there's this dirty great train that takes all the students to an' from the school. The Hogwarts Express, it's called. S'a long trip from King's Cross to the school, though. Mum said that it takes mosta the day. Hope we don't get stuck in a crowded compartment..." Tonks explained.

"Ahh... ..Tonks? Do you think the other students are going to make a

big deal of me? Like those people at the Leaky Cauldron did?"

Tonks looked at Harry, who was looking a bit nervous. "Don't like the popularity?" She asked.

"Not used to people paying attention to me." Harry explained with a shrug. "It still feels really odd... I don't FEEL important. I've always just...been there, in the background. Now it feels like I've been shoved out into the open for everyone to gawk at. It's nice to be away from the Dursley's an' I don't mind having some money, finally... but..."

"But you'd rather just be a regular, ordinary kid?" Tonks suggested.

Harry nodded.

"Ah, don't worry. If people stare, you can find some more spiders an' make 'em attack. Now then... let's get offa this subject an' onto happier ones." Tonks said, sitting up and grinning.

Harry sat up as well. "Like what?"

"Well, you still need to name your owl." Tonks began, motioning to the cage by the dresser that contained one sleeping, snow-white owl. "...And we need to properly write up a list of what to do to Malfoy."

Harry leaned forward and looked over at his owl. "I'm no good with names." He said. "Especially girls' names..."

"Don't call her something dumb like 'Nymphadora'..." Tonks said, a dry tone in her voice.

Harry chuckled a bit. "Right, I'll make sure not to. Any suggestions?"

"Well..." Tonks said, tilting her head back and thinking. "I have an auntie named Esmerelda...bit of a nutter, she is, though. I think one of my distant cousins is named Ginevra, but that's kinda hard t'pronounce, don'cha think?"

"Yeah, that is a bit of a mouthful." Harry agreed.

"Lesse... I know an Opal, a Sarah, a Stephanie, an Ellen, a Victoria, a Dana, a Hedwig, a Cara, a Laurie..." Tonks said, ticking names off on her fingers as she went.

"A Hedwig? What color is it?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tonks blinked. It took her a moment, but she eventually understood and lightly swatted Harry's arm. "A Hedwig, you silly sod, not a head wig! She's my Great Grandmother. Died when I was jus' a baby."

"Hm... It's a bit of an odd name." Harry said.

"It's different, alright." Tonks agreed.

"Right, then. Her name's Hedwig." Harry said. "I want something that no one else would think to name their owl."

Tonks smiled. "Hedwig it is, then! Now that THAT'S finally taken care of..."

The girl hopped off of the bed and ran out of the room. When she came back, she had a piece of parchment, a quill, and a book in tow. She hopped back onto the bed and put the book on her lap. Setting the parchment on it, she winked at Harry. "...Let's get that list done with."

Harry laughed, leaning back on his arms. "Sounds like a good way to kill time until supper rolls around..."

"Lesse...what should we title it? How 'bout... "101 Ways to Pester a Ponce'?"

Harry snorted.

Tonks smirked and jotted it down at the top of the parchment, being as elegant as she could manage. She then began writing down numbers along the left side.

"Now then..." She said, moving the quill back up beside the first

number. "I believe 'Putting spiders in his hair' was something we agreed on..."

"Don't forget 'waffling him with a toilet seat,' Tonks." Harry said, remembering an earlier conversation of theirs.

Tonks wrote this down as number two on the list.

"And then... having something proclaim revenge on Malfoy's pink bits. If we're gonna drop spiders in his hair, we need to think of another creature to send up his trousers." Tonks said, idly messing with the quill's feather. "Any ideas?"

"Dunno." Harry said. "Maybe we'll think of something once we get to Hogwarts. Keep that spot open."

Tonks nodded and wrote 'Attack his pink bits with ' - leaving the blank spot underlined so that she would know to go back to it.

"Could always make his breakfast explode all over the place. I'm sure he'd look right smashing with bits of egg and ham all over his face." Tonks said.

"Indeed he would." Harry agreed, nodding.

The two continued with their list up until the time that Andromeda returned home for the night. By that time, the two had created a grand total of twenty-six things to do to Malfoy over the course of the school year. Tonks had rolled the parchment up and put it into a spot where it would be secure.

After dinner, Harry claimed to be too tired to do much of anything else that day. He was still getting used to actually moving about a lot. Being trapped in a cupboard for eleven years and given very little freedom wasn't a good way to give one's muscles a workout. As such, his began aching after being out and about for very long. They had gotten better over the past weeks, but he still wasn't ready to run a marathon, by any means.

Harry had collapsed into bed that night, food still digesting, and

stared up at the ceiling. His life wasn't perfect... his parents were dead, he had lived a thoroughly horrid life, his body was still adjusting to being free, and he would probably have to deal with being famous for the rest of his life.

But, he had thought as his eyes flitted shut, all was not completely bad. He had a wonderful best friend, he had a nice place to live now, and he was going to be spending the better part of the year at a school that taught magic.

His life was slowly - very slowly - turning around. Harry found himself having fewer and fewer nightmares as the days had passed, as well. He had smiled to himself as he began to drift off that night. Once he got to Hogwarts, he had thought, things could only get much, much better.

Chapter 7 – Contact

"Harry! Nymmy! Hurry up or we'll be late!"

"Where's my wand holster?!"

"On your dresser!"

"Is Hedwig down there?!"

"Yes!"

"It isn't THERE! I meant my shoulder holster!"

"That's in your trunk!"

Tonks appeared at the top of the staircase, blinking. "That's right, I stuck it in there last night before I went to bed. Oi, c'mon, Harry!"

"Coming!" Harry replied, bolting from the guest bedroom while tugging on his favorite shirt (black with green trim).

Andromeda shrunk their trunks down and stuck them into her pocket, grabbing Hedwig's cage and ushering the children out of the house.

"We'll be going by car." Andromeda said, nodding toward a rather rickety-looking auto. "It's not much, but it gets me where I need to go when I have to travel into Muggle-heavy areas. Into the back with the two of you - come on!"

Once situated in the back, Harry was given his owl's cage, which he set between himself and his friend. Andromeda hopped into the front seat and, after a few attempts, got the car started.

"Too bad we couldn't have lunch first, eh, Harry?" Tonks asked as her stomach growled.

Harry nodded, his own following suit.

"Don't worry - there's a witch with a food cart that travels the length of the train a few times during the trip - you can get something from her." Andromeda said as she pulled the car out onto the road. "Just don't fill up too much or you won't have any room left for the start-of-term feast!"

"Feast?" Tonks said, perking up quite a bit.

"Oh yes. After the first years get sorted into their houses, the house tables fill up with all sorts of wonderful things. There's a good feast at the start and end of each term." Andromeda said with a fond smile of remembrance. "So, do you two have any idea of what house you'd like to be sorted into?"

"If I said anything other than Ravenclaw, what would YOU say?" Tonks asked, eyeballing her mother carefully.

"Oh, Nymmy, I don't care what house you get sorted into. As long as you keep your marks up and don't get into too much trouble, I'll be happy. And that goes for you too, Harry." Andromeda said. Then, under her breath, she muttered, "But I really hope the hat has more sense than to stick you lot into Slytherin."

"Hat?" Harry asked, catching the last bit.

"What hat?" Tonks followed.

"Hm? Oh, nothing, nothing. Was just talking to myself." Andromeda said, airily. For the next twenty minutes, Tonks tried to pry the information out of her mother about this hat - but to no avail. The best she got was a wink and a promise that it would be better if it wasn't spoiled.

For the rest of the ride, Harry asked Tonks about her Metamorphmagus powers. He soon learned that, once she got a full grasp of her ability, Tonks would probably become the best prankster that the school would see. Deep down, Harry hoped that he was one, as well. The simple thought of being able to change his face to the point of getting rid of his scar made him quite eager to at least try.

They pulled into King's Cross at ten till eleven. Andromeda rushed the duo down toward the spot where the magical barrier separated the Muggle side from the Wizarding side of the station.

"Now then... this is how we're going to get to Platform Nine and Three Quarters." Andromeda said, nodding toward the magical barrier. "A long while back, wizards devised a way for us to get the Express here without scaring the Muggles out of their wits. And this barrier is the key to it all. Take a run at it, full tilt, and you'll do fine. Don't worry about running INTO it or else you will. Concentrate on running PAST it - or through it. Whichever does the job. You two take a go at it. I'll be right behind you."

Harry and Tonks looked at each other, then looked around the Station. Muggles were coming and going as they pleased, not paying any attention at all to two children and one adult standing in the middle of the area. They nodded to one another and started running, Harry clutching Hedwig's cage close. Both shut their eyes right as they were about to collide with solid matter...

And were quite surprised at the sight in front of them when they opened their eyes once again. They turned and looked up to see a wrought iron sign that read 'Platform Nine and Three Quarters.' A moment later, Andromeda popped through the barrier, smiling at them. "You both did wonderfully! Wasn't hard at all, was it? Now then, let's get your trunks enlarged and onto the train." She said, pulling their trunks out of her pocket and walking toward the Express.

After enlarging them again, she turned and surveyed the two. With an almost-sad smile, she tugged Tonks into a hug and said, "I don't know what I'm going to do in my spare time with you out of the house. It's going to be awfully quiet..."

"Muum!" Tonks said, whining. "Stoppit! Don't get all mushy on me in the middle of the Platform!"

Though, Harry noticed, she WAS hugging her mother back.

Andromeda gave a great, melodramatic snuffle, then turned to Harry

and smiled. "And as for you, young man... you be sure to help keep Nymmy in line, alright? And, if you can, try and keep her from commandeering a Hogwarts toilet seat..."

Harry laughed, then blushed slightly as he, too, was swept up into a hug. After a moment, he hugged the woman back and whispered, "Thank you... for everything."

Andromeda smiled at him as the two let go of one another. "No thanks necessary. I'm just glad we've managed to help put you back together again!"

Just then, the whistle on the giant, red locomotive sounded, startling the trio out of their own little world. Looking around, Andromeda nearly jumped out of her robes. "Oh, what am I DOING?" She said, flailing slightly. "Get onto the train, you two! Go on! Drag your trunks up and leave them off to one side - they'll get to where they need to go!"

Tonks got onto the Hogwarts Express first, followed by Harry, who took a brief moment to gaze at the train - the first he had ever seen up-close before.

"Should I leave Hedwig here, as well?" Harry asked Tonks as they boarded properly.

Tonks looked at where the other students had dropped their trunks. Seeing a few other cages, she shrugged and nodded. "Don't see why not."

"I'll see you a bit later, girl." Harry said to Hedwig, reaching into the cage with a finger to stroke the owl's feathers. Hedwig responded with an almost sleepy-sounding hoot. Harry set her cage on top of his trunk and the two set off to find themselves a compartment.

As they walked, passing other students by, Harry messed with his bangs, hiding his scar as best as he could. Tonks frowned at him and asked, "You really don't want people fawning over you, huh?"

"Let's put it this way - the first thing I'm going to try and do if I AM a

Metamorphmagus is to get rid of the stupid thing. All it does is remind me that I don't have any parents and that I'm famous for something I don't even remember." Harry said, voice quiet so as not to attract attention.

Tonks frowned again. "That bad, huh? I thought it looked kinda nice on ya, but..."

Harry blinked at her, but was distracted when a toad nearly collided with his face. A moment later, a loud whine came from somewhere a few compartments down. Exchanging a confused look with Tonks, Harry shrugged. "Hey, this one's empty! We might actually be able to have it to ourselves for the whole of the trip."

The two entered and promptly looked out the window. Finding her mother, Tonks called out to her a few times to get her attention. Once she had, she and Harry spent the next minute waving and saying their goodbyes.

The train sputtered to life with a jolt, sending Harry keeling over onto one of the seats. He popped back up just as quickly to join Tonks in waving goodbye to Andromeda as the train pulled out of the station. Once she was out of sight, Tonks flopped down and sighed.

Sitting opposite her, Harry asked, "Going to miss her, huh?"

"Of course I am! Who's gonna keep her on her toes while I'm at school, huh? Maybe I SHOULD try sending her a Hogwarts toilet seat...y'know, jus' to see what she does." Tonks said, staring down at the floor. Harry smirked. He knew how Tonks must have felt. After all, Andromeda had become almost like family to him in the time he had spent at their house.

But they were off on their own now. Off to a place that Harry could only have dreamed of in the past. And, if Tonks was right about him having the possibility of being a Metamorphmagus...

The two spent the first half hour of the train ride talking excitedly about what the school would look like and what kind of classes that they'd be taking. As they were starting to ponder what kind of

teachers the school would have, the door to their compartment slid open and a round-faced boy looked at them and asked, "Have either of you seen a toad?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Well, one nearly leapt onto my face around the time the train was about to pull out. It yours?"

"Yeah." The boy said in a dejected voice. "But I don't think he likes me much. Keeps getting away... if you find him, I'm in the last compartment in this section of the train... my name's Neville... Neville Longbottom."

"Harry Potter." Harry said.

"...Are you really?" Neville said, awe in his voice.

"Uh...yeah..." Harry said, nervously glancing to Tonks.

"...Well, it's nice to meet you. I'd better get back to looking for Trevor..." Neville said.

"Good luck finding him." Tonks offered.

The boy nodded and, with a sigh, he slid the door shut and took off down the corridor. Once he was gone, Harry looked at Tonks and asked, "Why would anyone bring a toad in the first place? Kind of useless, aren't they?"

"Mostly." Tonks said, nodding. "Cats and owls are much more useful. Less slimy, too. Now then, what were we talking about?"

"Staff."

"Ah, right! Mum used to tell me stories about the awful Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher she had. Went by the name of Dolchett, I think she said it was. Mean as an angry bee, apparently. Said that he deducted house points almost daily from all four houses..." Tonks said, stretching her legs out on her side of the compartment. Since no one else was beside him, Harry decided to do the same.

"I hope we don't get stuck with any screaming, angry bees for teachers." Harry said, making a face.

"On the plus side, we'd get to see that prat Malfoy get dressed down, too." Tonks said, shrugging.

"True. But just the same..."

The compartment door slid open again. This time, a slender boy with a slightly tired expression on his face stood there. "Oi, anyone else sitting here? Got booted out of the compartment I WAS in...bloody sixth year wanted some girl he fancied to sit there, instead..."

Harry shrugged and swung his legs back down, motioning to the spot beside him. "It's just the two of us." He said.

The boy smiled and entered the compartment, closing the door and flopping down with a groan. "I've been up and down the whole of the train, looking for a free spot. Thanks, by the way. Name's Dean Thomas."

"Harry Potter." Harry said, tentatively.

Dean Thomas raised his eyebrows and surveyed Harry once. "Really? Huh... No offense, but you don't look anything like what I'd imagined..."

"None taken." Harry replied. "Oi, Tonks...you gonna introduce yourself?"

"I was getting to it!" Tonks said, sticking her tongue out at Harry. Turning to Dean, she opened her mouth...closed it...then opened it again and muttered, "Nymphadora Tonks. But just call me 'Tonks'...I hate my first name."

"Don't blame you." Dean said, grinning crookedly. "Well, it's nice to meet you both, in any case. You're lifesavers. I don't think I could have walked another step."

"Ah, don't worry about it. Me an' Harry were jus' shootin' the breeze,

anyway. Not like you interrupted anything." Tonks said, looking at Harry and taunting him with how much more legroom she had.

Harry scowled.

Harry and Tonks filled Dean in on what they had been talking about, effectively bringing him into the conversation. The newly-formed trio spent the better part of the afternoon speaking like this until yet another person slid open the compartment door. Tonks took one look and let out a whoop - it was the witch with the food cart.

Harry chuckled and asked for a little bit of everything. After all the talk Tonks had spent going over the massive amounts of strange sweets in the Wizarding world, Harry was dying to try some. And so it came to be that a small mountain of various treats came to rest on the seat beside Tonks.

"Hey, try a chocolate frog - just be quick about biting the thing's legs off first. I had one leap all over the house before I finally caught it." Tonks said, making a face as she recalled the event. She grabbed an unopened chocolate frog and tossed it to Harry, who opened it.

He had just reached for the frog when it leap up and onto his face. It quickly bounded over to (and out) the window. Harry scowled again. "What is it with me and frogs today?" He asked, bitterly.

"What card didja get?" Tonks asked after nearly choking on what she claimed to be an armpit-flavored Every Flavor Bean. When Dean had questioned how Tonks would even know what an armpit tasted like, he received a sharp glare.

"It's Dumbledore!" Harry said, looking down at the picture of the old wizard, who smiled up at him.

"Ah, I have about a half dozen of him. Was kinda hoping to finally get a Hesper Starkey..." Tonks said, pouting.

Harry read over the card. "'Famous for defeating the dark wizard Grindlewald'... what kinda name is 'Grindlewald'? Sounds like something your mum would name a son, Tonks."

"Oh, go soak your head."

"Let's see... 'discovered the twelve uses of dragon's blood'... and for 'his work on alchemy with his friend Nicholas Flamel'... not a bad bit of information, that." Harry said. "But what's alchemy?"

"Oh, I know that." Dean piped in. "Had an uncle who tried that once. It's pretty complicated stuff... my uncle just wanted to try turning stuff into gold, though. Ended up getting a month in Azkaban for it... it's illegal to turn things to gold via alchemy..."

"Azkaban?" Harry asked.

"Wizard's pr--" Tonks began, popping a gray bean into her mouth... and immediately spitting it back out. "Prison... bloody hell, did they have to include toilet-flavored beans?"

"Now how do you know what a toilet tastes l--" Harry began. But he, like Dean before him, fell victim to Tonks' death glare.

Harry turned to Dean, leaned in close, and whispered, "I think we should stop asking. I don't want to be hexed before I learn how to defend myself."

Dean raised an eyebrow, but nodded and whispered back, "Agreed. Does she always use such colorful language?"

"First time I've heard her say that." Harry said, shrugging.

"Oi, what're you two so quiet about, eh?" Tonks asked.

"Nothing!" The boys replied in unison.

Tonks was about to open her mouth when, yet again, the compartment door slid open. This time, however, no whoops of joy were made. Tonks made another face, but it wasn't from a badly-flavored bean.

"They're saying all along the train that Harry Potter is on board."

Came the drawling voice of one Draco Malfoy. He was flanked by a pair of rather beefy-looking boys. Then, noticing Tonks for the first time, the blonde sneered. "Oh, it's you."

"Nice to see you, too, Malfoy. Who're your goons?" Tonks replied casually.

"Not that it's any of your concern, but this is Crabbe... and this is Goyle." Draco said, nodding over his shoulder at each of his muscle squad in turn. He turned his gaze to Harry, who narrowed his eyes in reply.

"So...you're the great Harry Potter, are you?" Drawled the blonde.

"That's right." Harry answered curtly.

"Not much to show for yourself. I was expecting someone with at least a BIT of class." Draco said, smirking.

"Shove off, Malfoy. Or do you want to be knocked on your butt again?" Tonks taunted, smirking as well.

Draco Malfoy went scarlet. His eyes narrowed to slits and he hissed, "You keep your bloody mouth shut!"

"I take it we don't like this guy?" Dean dryly asked Harry.

"That's a bit of an understatement." Harry replied, just as dryly.

"And who's THIS?" Malfoy said, looking at Dean for the first time.

"Name's Dean Thomas." Dean said shortly.

"Thomas... now where have I heard that name before? Oh, that's right. My father says that YOUR father up and got himself killed." Malfoy said, smiling viciously at the boy.

Anger flickered past Dean's face briefly, but it was gone just as quick. With a careless shrug, he replied, "Dunno. Dad left mum back when I was in diapers. Mum never told me anything about him, though. Far

as I know, he's still alive and well."

"Yes, you keep telling yourself that. Listen, Potter..." Draco said, turning back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some Wizarding families are much better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there. I'm even willing to overlook the fact that you sucker-punched me in Madam Malkin's."

With this, the blonde extended a pale hand towards Harry, who looked at it as if it were covered in something foul.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks." Harry said, crossing his arms firmly across his chest.

Draco had a mixture of fury, embarrassment, and shock written on his face. Slowly withdrawing his hand, he glared at Harry and growled, "You'll regret that decision, Potter. Mark my words...you WILL regret that. Come on. We're leaving."

Draco slammed the door shut once more, turning and storming off down the corridor with his cronies in check. When he was gone, Harry looked to Dean and asked, "You alright? Looked like he hit a nerve there."

Dean sighed, shrugging. "It's just... well, I'm sure my dad IS dead. Mum got really depressed the one time I asked about him... and there haven't been any letters or anything from him. Even if he's alive, I...I'm not sure I'd want to meet him. I've got a great stepfather now, anyway...so it's not like it really matters... he's been more of a father to me than my real father was."

"Sounds rough." Tonks said around a bean that apparently wasn't horribly-flavored. "Well, now that we ALL hate Malfoy, what's say we introduce our new friend to The List, Harry?"

Harry blinked, then grinned. "You have it with you?!"

"Always." Tonks said, reaching into the pocket of her jeans and pulling out a folded-up piece of parchment - the same one that they had written down ideas on what to do to Draco Malfoy over the

course of the year. Tonks handed it over to Harry, who in turn handed it over to Dean.

"We've been working on it ever since we met the ponce in Diagon Alley." Tonks explained.

"Wow...fifty ideas so far? Let's see..." Dean began, skimming over the extensive list. "...'Pink Bits'?"

Harry snorted. Tonks scowled and blushed.

"...Right. Pink bits. What else... turning his hair rainbow-colored, hitting him with an itching hex... ...Hit him with a curse that removes all of his clothes?!" Dean asked, shuddering at the mental image.

Harry shuddered as well, pointing at Tonks. "Blame her for that one. Though I do have to agree - it WOULD shut him up."

"Yes, but would it be worth making the whole of the school vomit?" Dean asked.

"Good point."

The rest of the trip was spent going over the list, adding to it, and removing certain things that, in retrospect, were really, really bizarre. And, just as they were about to pull into Hogsmeade Station, Dean finally got Tonks to explain just where on earth the term 'Pink Bits' had come from.

He, like Harry, spent the next few minutes in giggles.

Chapter 8 – Sorted Affairs

"Wow..."

Harry could only nod his head dumbly at the sight set out before him. He was on a tiny boat that was self-propelling itself across a rather vast lake. Tonks was all but crushing his left arm in a tight squeeze. And an enormous castle, growing larger by the minute, seemed to be where their journey would be coming to an end.

To say that the duo were at a loss for words would have been more than a slight understatement. As soon as the thick fog had lifted, the castle had come into sight in all of its glory, the full moon overhead illuminating it in such a way to make it seem almost otherworldly.

When he and Tonks had finally gotten off of the Hogwarts Express earlier that night, they had parted ways with Dean Thomas, who had to run to catch a boat with some of his other friends. Harry and Tonks, along with all of the other first years, had been ushered into small boats by one Rubeus Hagrid. As they passed by, Hagrid gave Harry a wink. Harry offered a feeble smile in return, his mind flashing back to meeting the oversized man in Diagon Alley just weeks prior.

And now...

Now they had finally arrived. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was welcoming them with open arms. Harry couldn't help but crane his head back, looking up towards the very tops of the tallest towers. His mind raced, wondering what was kept inside every nook and cranny of the magical building.

Tonks, Harry had noticed, had gone almost completely silent as soon as Hogwarts had come into sight. This was fairly new to Harry, who had gotten used to her talking his ear off at times. In addition, she seemed to have a firm, unbreakable hold on his left arm – something that felt somewhat strange to Harry, who wasn't used to physical contact that didn't wind up with him nursing a wound.

"Heads down!" Hagrid cried, suddenly. Harry didn't react quickly enough and was slapped in the face by a sudden curtain of ivy.

Tonks snorted from beside him. The boats continued through a dark tunnel, seemingly taking the first years underneath the castle itself. Before long, they reached a sort of underground harbor.

"Alright, you lot! Outta yer boats! Careful not t'slip, now!" Hagrid said as the boats docked themselves amongst some slippery rocks and pebbles. "An' anyone missin' their toad'd do well in catchin' that ne before i' hops back inna the water!"

"Trevor!" Came a whine from one Neville Longbottom, who hopped out of his boat, only to fall onto his backside on the rocks.

Tonks and Harry exchanged a glance and rolled their eyes.

"Now then!" Hagrid said, motioning the first years over. "Follo' me! An' watch yer heads!"

The group trailed after Hagrid as they walked up a passageway in the rock. They came out onto solid, if a little damp, grass that was right in the shadow of the castle itself.

"Nervous?" Tonks whispered aside to Harry, as their group was lead up a flight of stone steps and towards a huge, oak front door. Licking his lips, Harry looked at Tonks and smiled crookedly, whispering back, "Why? Are you?"

Before she could answer, three loud, echoing knocks on the door made the two jump. Hagrid lowered a meaty hand and the doors swung open at once. Standing in the entrance was an elderly, stern-looking woman whose lips were pursed. As she surveyed the group, Hagrid nodded and said, "The firs' years, Professor McGonagall."

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

Opening the door up a bit more, McGonagall led the group into the Entrance Hall. Harry gaped, looking around the monstrously large room. Tonks was obviously doing the same, as a moment later she had tapped Harry on the shoulder and whispered, "This room's bigger than my whole bloody HOUSE!"

Harry nodded and the group began moving once more. Following the Professor, they were lead through a doorway on the right side of the area. It was rather cramped in this spot, and Harry suddenly found one Nymphadora Tonks pressed up against his back, muttering a curse under her breath, followed by an apology to Harry.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall said. "The start of term feast will begin shortly. But before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you must be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because..."

While McGonagall droned on, Tonks managed to squeeze herself away from Harry's back and moved beside him, mouthing another apology. Harry just smiled in return, hoping it was too dark in the small room for her to notice the faint blush on his cheeks.

"--hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours." McGonagall finished, surveying the children once more. To Harry, she seemed nice enough, if a little rigid. He certainly didn't want to get on her bad side, however, if this was what she looked like in a pleasant mood.

"The ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school." She continued, telling the group to straighten themselves up. "I will return when we are ready for you."

And with that, the Professor turned and left the chamber.

Immediately, the first years began excitedly talking amongst themselves. Harry and Tonks looked at each other. "Wish your mum had told us more about this." Harry said, nervously. Tonks nodded. "Me too." She said.

From the front of the group, Harry heard one boy say, "--said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking..."

Harry's eyes connected to Tonks' once again. "You don't think it does, do you?" He asked.

After a moment of hesitation, Tonks shook her head. "No way. Mum says Hogwarts is one of the safest places in all o' Europe... I dunno what that guy's been hearin', but..."

From somewhere behind him, Harry could hear a girl whispering at a fast pace about all of the spells that she had learned. Tonks raised an eyebrow as she peered over her shoulder, then muttered, "Reminds me of Malfoy. Loves hearin' her own voice."

Harry could only nod in agreement.

Just as Harry was about to say something else to Tonks, Professor McGonagall stepped back in. Clearing her throat to draw silence, she began, "Everything is ready. Follow me, please."

As the front of the group began to follow the Professor into the Great Hall, Harry suddenly found one of his hands being held onto tightly. Casting a glance aside, he found Tonks looking about as nervous as he felt. Unsure of what else to do, he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. She smiled weakly at him in response.

Forming a line as they left the room, the group entered the Great Hall. Harry goggled once more. Thousands of candles floated overhead, illuminating the whole of the room. Four long tables stretched down the length of the room, students filling most of the seats. All of them had their eyes on the new arrivals. Harry suddenly felt as if a second adam's apple was filling his throat.

"Hey! Hey, Harry, look!" Tonks hissed from in front of him. "It's Dumbledore!"

Harry's attention moved from the other students to the staff table at the far end of the room. Indeed, Dumbledore was sitting in the middle of the faculty, smiling as he watched new students filter in. Harry leaned his head forward and murmured, "Bet he gets a real kick out of seeing us squirm."

Tonks grinned over her shoulder.

McGonagall led the students so that they came to a halt in front of the staff table and faced the rest of the school. Harry then noticed

something else that made his eyes go wide. Nudging Tonks, he motioned with his head out into the room. Tonks followed his gaze, her eyes shooting open, as well. Several silver, ghostly figures were floating about the four house tables, conversing with the students quietly. "Ghosts?" Harry mouthed. Tonks nodded, still looking surprised.

A moment later, Tonks was nudging Harry. Turning his head, Harry saw Professor McGonagall pulling a four-legged stool out from somewhere behind the staff table. On top of it, she placed an old, pointed hat. It looked a mess, leaving Harry to wonder what on earth it was for. Before he could go over it much longer, he received an answer. The hat twitched, then a rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth. It then proceeded...to sing?

Harry cocked an eyebrow Tonks' way as the hat trilled and spied about what it was. Tonks looked almost as bewildered as Harry, though it slowly turned to comprehension. Leaning close, Tonks hissed, "THAT must be the hat Mum mentioned in the car!"

When the hat had finished singing, a boy a few students down let out a loud sigh of relief, then grumbled, "All we've got to do is try on the hat! I'll kill Fred. He was going on about wrestling a troll!"

Professor McGonagall stepped forward again, this time holding a long roll of parchment. She cleared her throat, then said, "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted." She glanced down at the list, then began, "Abbott, Hannah!"

A blonde girl with pigtails bounced out of line to Harry's left. She walked over and sat on the stool, putting the hat on. It fell down over her eyes. A moment passed before the hat opened its mouth once more and cried out, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

Hannah removed the hat and scurried over to the Hufflepuff table, whose students were clapping and welcoming her.

"Bones, Susan!" McGonagall said next.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" The hat cried again. Susan got up and joined Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Bulstrode, Millicent!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

Harry and Tonks looked at each other once more. Tonks leaned in and whispered, "Do whatever you can to keep from getting sorted into Slytherin, Harry... remember, I'm coming with you..."

"Hopefully." Harry replied, watching another first year get sorted into Hufflepuff.

"Granger, Hermione!"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"...And try to keep out of there, as well." Tonks added, eyeballing the girl who had been busily chattering earlier.

Neville Longbottom was sorted shortly after Hermione Granger, following her to the Gryffindor table with his toad clutched tightly. Then another Slytherin. And then...

"Ponce alert!" Tonks hissed.

Harry scowled as Malfoy swaggered up towards the hat, a look of calm superiority on his face. He had barely sat down, the hat barely touching the top of his head when it howled, "SLYTHERIN!"

"No surprise there." Tonks growled, watching Malfoy join with his two goons, who had also been sorted into Slytherin.

Harry's name was drawing closer and closer, the line of students getting shorter and shorter. Harry felt Tonks put a hand on his arm. She gave it a squeeze as Professor McGonagall called his name.

Almost at once, the students began whispering amongst themselves. Harry felt his face heat up once more. Hurrying to the stool, Harry

took a seat and placed the Sorting Hat on. It felt down a bit past his eyes, thankfully blocking out the intent gazes of the students.

"Hmm... so, you're the one that they all talk about." Said a small voice in Harry's ear. "Not at all what I'd expected... No, you've led a very traumatizing life, haven't you, boy? Oh yes... I can see that. A lot of hardships in your eleven years. But hopefully no more. Now then... let's see what you've got in you. Hmm... very loyal, you are. Almost to a fault, in fact. I can sense that you've become quite protective of someone. Fancying girls a bit early, aren't we?" The voice paused then, seeming to enjoy the blush that had crept onto Harry's face.

Eventually, the hat shifted slightly before the voice continued speaking. "Your mind hasn't had much of a chance to flourish, has it? No... I suppose it wouldn't have. You've a lot of instinct in here... as well as courage to spare. I can also sense a thirst for knowledge... and that you'd rather not be in the public's eye. You don't like the popularity thrust on you... not one bit. Where, then, should I sort you?"

Harry's fingers gripped the edges of the stool, a single thought coursing through his mind - 'Not Slytherin... please, not Slytherin...'

"Not Slytherin, eh?" Said the voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know. HE... was quite great, as well. A pity what became of him. Well, if not Slytherin, then perhaps Gryffindor would suit you... it could certainly help bring out the courage that lays dormant within..."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He had been up far longer than any of the other students. He didn't want to be sorted into Slytherin – not when Malfoy was there. Not when... not when the man who had murdered his parents had also been sorted there...

"Well, well... your dislike of Slytherin house DOES run deep, doesn't it, lad? Reasonable, though, considering what happened. In any case, the time has come for my to make my decision. You would serve well to all of the houses. You're cunning, very loyal... smart, yet quite able to think on your feet and take care of yourself. Yes... Yes, I believe I know exactly where you belong. The draw of Slytherin does nothing for you... and the glory of Gryffindor isn't what you seek, is it? I can

sense something deep within you...and I know that I'm making the right decision when I place you in..."

Tonks couldn't remember feeling so nervous in all her life. Licking her dry lips, she could only wonder what was taking so long. None of the other students had taken even half the time that Harry was. But then, she saw the mouth of the hat open once more. Its voice rang clear, echoing for a moment within the sudden silence that had been cast over the Great Hall.

"RAVENCLAW!"

The Ravenclaw table erupted into applause as Harry shakily removed the hat from his head. Casting a glance back at Tonks and looking somewhat worried, Harry set the hat back down and walked over to a place beside Terry Boot at the Ravenclaw table.

As he sat, he barely noticed a tall ghost congratulate him on joining her former house. Harry's mind was on Tonks. After one more student (Dean Thomas) joined Gryffindor (He and Harry waved to one another as he walked to the Gryffindor table) and one more became a Hufflepuff, it was Tonks' turn at the hat.

Harry watched as she took the hat and sat down, placing it on top of her head. It sat crooked and Harry managed to lock glances with her right eye - the only one not covered by the slanted hat. She seemed to be having a fast-paced, heated discussion with it in a very quiet tone.

A minute passed. As time dragged itself out in a painfully slow manner, the knot in Harry's stomach began growing larger. What if she didn't become a Ravenclaw, as well? What if he had to go into Ravenclaw all by himself? He certainly didn't know anyone else, and he desperately pleaded with whatever higher power existed that neither he nor his friend had to deal with their first year at the school by themselves.

Harry was so caught-up in his internal worrying that he didn't hear what house the hat finally cried out. The applause brought on by the announcement, however, did snap him back to reality. He looked up at Tonks, who was just setting the hat back down. For a brief moment,

the two locked eyes as she turned. And then slowly, as if everything in the world had grinded to a standstill, she walked over and sat down beside him.

The roar of the Ravenclaw table was drowned out by the pounding in Harry's chest. All at once, relief washed over him. Tonks grinned at this and promptly threw her arms around Harry, giving him a brief, yet strong, hug.

The Sorting continued as the noise from their table quieted once more. "You had me worried sick!" Harry whispered. "What took so long?!"

"Bloody hat wanted to make me a Hufflepuff at first." Tonks snorted, scowling as one Lisa Turpin joined them at the Ravenclaw table. As a redheaded boy stepped up to the hat, his face green, Tonks continued, "I had to sit and argue with it. Told it that my Mum was in Ravenclaw. Told it I planned to follow you wherever you got sorted and that I wouldn't take anything else for an answer. It finally gave in... Was worried, too. What about you, then? You weren't exactly up there for a short time, either."

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Ugh... first, it thought I'd do well in Slytherin. Had to will it not to put me there." Harry said, making a face.

"Your knuckles were going white, you had such a hold on that stool." Tonks said, grinning.

"Yeah, well, you would've, too, if it had wanted to stick you over there with Malfoy. Anyway, then it wanted to put me in Gryffindor. But it seemed like I'd just get even more fame and popularity if I went there..."

"And you don't want that. Right..." Tonks said, nodding slowly.

"Right...So anyway, it said a lot about my life and what was hidden deep in me...or something like that. And then it finally called out Ravenclaw." Harry finished, shaking his head.

"SLYTHERIN!"

General clapping from all four tables started up then, causing Harry and Tonks to pause in their discussion. Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. Beaming at the students, he opened his arms wide. "Welcome!" He began. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

As the headmaster sat back down, everybody clapped and cheered. Harry shook his head and looked at Tonks. "He's a bit mad, isn't he?"

"Course he is. All the strongest wizards are, really. And Dumbledore's the best in the world. So yeah, he's a bit loony." Tonks replied, chuckling. "Oi, look! Time to fill up!"

Harry blinked, then looked back at the table. A veritable feast's worth of food was now lining the four house tables. Had he not gotten used to eating regular meals at Tonks' house, he would've been outright stunned by some of the things that had been prepared.

As Harry piled various things onto his plate, the ghost that had earlier congratulated him pointed towards the Gryffindor table. "Look. He's at it again."

Harry looked up, taking a quick bite of a bit of chicken as he did. A ghost in a ruff and tights was staring mournfully down at the food on the Gryffindor table. From his side, Harry heard the female ghost say, "He does it every year. Trying to collect sympathy from the first years, I think."

Harry popped a bit of potato into his mouth as he turned to look at the ghost next to him. Noticing his gaze, the ghost smiled at him and inclined her head. "They call me the Grey Lady. Ravenclaw used to be my house before I died. When I came back, I decided to help keep its students in check. Filius does need a bit of help, at times."

"Filius?" Harry asked.

"Filius Flitwick, head of your house and Charms teacher. Look, over there." The Grey Lady said, swishing an arm up and pointing up to

the staff table and towards a rather tiny wizard. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Filius is quite brilliant with charms of all sorts...but, sad as it may be, his short stature often leads to authority issues. I'm glad to help out, though. Being a ghost IS spectacularly boring at times." Said the ghost. And then, frowning slightly, she let out a sigh. "Oh, dear. The Baron is here..."

Harry followed the Lady's gaze over toward the Slytherin table where a horrible ghost was sitting next to Malfoy, who didn't look too happy about it. His eyes were blank, his face was gaunt, and his robes seemed to be stained with silver blood.

"How did he get covered in blood?" Harry asked, cautiously.

"Ah... well, the other house ghosts and I have made it a point to never ask. The Bloody Baron has a tendency to be... irritable, shall we say." Said the Lady. "Though the Fat Friar HAS tried... no luck so far, however."

After this, the Grey Lady floated off down the table to converse with a pair of sixth year boys. Harry continued to eat, wishing he hadn't had quite so many sweets on the train ride in. Nevertheless, when the food faded and the desserts appeared, Harry couldn't help but take a slice of apple pie.

Next to him, Tonks was happily wolfing down a slice of cake that Harry could only believe was angel food. Harry watched her for a moment, his mind going back to something that the Sorting Hat had said to him - something about fancying someone. Harry flushed and stared pointedly at his pie, picking at it with his fork. It was silly to think that he liked Tonks as anything other than a close friend... wasn't it?

Thinking back, Harry recalled how angry he had felt when Malfoy had been insulting her. How he had, as if his body had acted on its own, punched the blonde to the ground. The hat's words rang clearly in his ears once more.

All around them, students were finishing their meals and were now quietly talking with one another. Tonks seemed to be talking to another first year - Lisa Turpin - about how Harry had defended her, despite the fact that she really hadn't needed it. This only made Harry's blush worsen.

The food started to catch up to him, making him rather drowsy. Harry shot a glance up to the staff table. Hagrid, the man who had brought him to live with his aunt and uncle, seemed to be in the process of getting drunk. Professor McGonagall was talking to the headmaster himself. Next to them, a nervous-looking man in a turban was talking to a rather sallow-skinned man with greasy, black hair. The man with the greasy hair turned at one point in the conversation. As his eyes

scanned the tables, they met Harry's. A sharp, hot pain shot through the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ahh!" Harry hissed, clapping a hand to his head.

"Harry? You okay?" Tonks asked, her attention turning back to Harry as he winced.

"Y...Yeah, I'm fine... Only it felt like someone had pressed a hot poker against my head for a minute..." Harry replied, frowning as he rubbed his scar. "The teacher with the greasy hair looked at me and... there it was."

Tonks looked up to the staff table to see whom Harry was talking about. She then nudged an older student and asked, "Who's the greaseball up there, eh?"

The sixth year blinked, looked at the staff table briefly, then explained, "Ahh, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions. He doesn't want to, though. Everyone knows he's after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. Rumors say he knows a lot of Dark Arts himself... and that he's none too happy with Professor Quirrell snatching the spot away from him."

"Quirrell?"

"Nervous guy in the turban. Stutters a lot, he does. Didn't used to, though... apparently he went on vacation and had a run-in with a vampire." Said the sixth year, shaking his head. "Lot of rubbish if you ask me. I think he's just scared of Snape."

"Ahem --" Came a voice from the staff table. Dumbledore was once again on his feet. "Just a few more words now that we have all been fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give out. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that, as well."

Dumbledore's eyes were glancing towards the Gryffindor table. Harry followed his gaze and came across a pair of red-haired boys - twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors." Dumbledore continued. "Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch. And finally... I must warn you that this year, the third floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry felt a sudden curiosity take over him. Hadn't Tonks said that Hogwarts was one of the safest places in all of Europe?

"He's not serious, is he?" Tonks whispered to him. Harry just shrugged and replied, "You know him better than I do! You tell me!"

"It's odd." Said the sixth year that Tonks had asked about Snape. "He usually gives us a reason why we can't go somewhere... the forest's full of all sorts of deadly creatures. That's why it's forbidden! But I'm not sure why that corridor is off bounds... there isn't anything down there..."

"And now, before we all head off to our nice, cozy beds... let us sing the school song!" Said Dumbledore, pulling out his wand and giving it a small flick.

Harry and Tonks could only watch on in confused bewilderment as the school erupted into song. Only... no one was singing the same

tune as someone else. Everyone went at different paces and using different tones. It was one gigantic, loud mess.

The twins at the Gryffindor table were the last to finish. Once they had, Dumbledore smiled and cleared his throat. "Ah, music. A magic beyond all we do here. Now then, bedtime! Off you go!"

The Ravenclaw first years followed a tall girl with silver-blond hair out of the Great Hall. "Follow me!" She said. "Pay attention to where we're going, now."

As their group was leaving through another door in the Entrance Hall, a startled yelp from the staircase made the group pause momentarily. A little man with dark eyes, wearing a ridiculous outfit, seemed to be harassing the Gryffindors. The female prefect rolled her eyes and, as she began leading them towards the west wing of the castle, explained, "That was Peeves. He's a poltergeist. A troublemaker if ever there was one. You'd do well to keep away from him. He has a way to make you late for classes...and he's good at getting students into trouble in other ways."

"Why don't they get rid o' him if he's so much trouble?" Tonks asked, crossing her arms behind her head.

"Well," Said the girl, "It isn't as if they haven't tried. The Grey Lady said that they just can't get ahold of him for long enough to do something. Thankfully, the Bloody Baron seems to be able to keep him in line. That isn't saying much, as the Baron's just as bad, at times..."

The group continued following the girl - who turned out to be named Lindsay Erran, a prefect - up and down corridors until they reached a spiraling staircase. "Right, you lot." She said with a smile. "This is Ravenclaw Tower. The entrance to our common room's at the top. A portrait of Walter the Wise guards it."

The group followed Lindsay up the staircase until they reached the portrait in question. It was of an elderly man with a beard that could have rivaled Dumbledore's. He was dressed in midnight-blue robes with multi-colored stars on them. He seemed to be in a study of sorts,

sitting at a desk with books surrounding him. When he caught sight of the students, he smiled. "Ahh, it's time, is it?"

"Hullo, Walter. These are our new arrivals." Lindsay indicated the first year Ravenclaws. She then turned to the assembled group and said, "The password for entry is 'Lucidus Susceptor,' alright?"

With this, the portrait opened wide, revealing an arched pathway. "In you go!" Lindsay said, smiling as she ushered students in. "Come on, the common room's on the other side!"

Harry let Tonks go first, following her into the darkened passage. When they came out, they were in a beautiful room decorated in bronze and various shades of blue. Near the pathway's exit was a large fireplace, which was currently crackling away and providing heat to the room. In front of it was an enormous, semi-circular couch that looked as if it could seat a dozen students easily. Other chairs and couches, all looking quite plush and comfortable, were littered about the room, as well. A number of tables were scattered around, as well. The ceiling overhead, like the one in the Great Hall, seemed to be enchanted to reveal the current sky outside.

"Wow..." Harry said quietly, taking it all in.

"'Wow' is right..." Said Tonks from his side. "Guess it pays off havin' the Charms professor as your head of house."

"Oh, yes..." Said Lindsay Erran, following in the last of the Ravenclaw students. "Professor Flitwick loves tweaking the room up a bit, every now and again. He says that nothing's more important than a comfortable place to study. He once said the Slytherin common room is cold and full of hard, wooden furniture. Can't imagine staying down in the dungeons..."

A throat was cleared from somewhere across the room. Turning, Harry saw a boy with spiky, red hair looking over the group. "Ah, good. Now that I have your attention, I'd like to explain to the first years where they're to be sleeping. Over here, you'll see two staircases. The one on the left leads down to the boys' dormitories. The one on the right leads up and to the girls' dormitories. First years, you'll come across your rooms first. Hard to miss. I'd also like to

remind some of our OLDER students..." Here, the boy eyeballed a number of Ravenclaws. "That any boys caught trying to sneak into the girls' dorm rooms will trigger the spell on the staircase. Let's not forget what happened when Alan tried seeing his girlfriend last year."

At this, some snickers came from a group of boys.

"Right, then! Off to bed with you lot. You'll receive your class schedules tomorrow at breakfast. Classes won't begin until the day after, so you can get accustomed to living here. If you've got any problems, don't hesitate in getting ahold of Lindsay or I. We're prefects and we'll do what we can to help you if need be." Said the boy, who still hadn't given his name.

"Well," Tonks said as students began filtering off towards the two staircases. "Guess this is goodnight, huh?"

"Yeah... what a day. I'm going to sleep like a rock." Harry said, a yawn coming over him.

Tonks whined as one hit her, as well. "Mmph... same here. Been a long day. Well... sweet dreams, huh?"

"Yeah... sweet dreams..."

The two stood there for a moment, then Tonks leaned in and gave Harry a quick hug. Grinning crookedly as she pulled away, she winked and said, "I guess you'll have to learn to survive, not seeing my beautiful face every morning, hauling your lazy butt down to breakfast, won'tcha?"

"Hey! I'm not THAT lazy... it just takes awhile for me to wake up, that's all..." Harry said, defensively. "You're one to talk. Weren't YOU the one who slept in until two in the afternoon last Saturday?"

Tonks made a face. "Only 'cause you kept me up, thinking of stuff to add to the list!"

"Excuses, excuses." Harry said, scuttling off to the boys' staircase before Tonks could swat him. "G'night, Tonks!"

"Night, Harry! I'll wait for ya down here!" Tonks replied with a grin.

Harry nodded, then turned and began walking up to what would be his new room for the year. Yawning again, Harry stretched. Thankfully, the walk was a short one. Opening the door, he saw four other boys sitting around and talking as they changed into their pajamas. Harry only recognized one of these - Terry Boot - as he had been too busy worrying about both his and Tonks' sorting. The four looked up as he entered.

"Can't believe you got sorted here... are you really Harry Potter?" Said a longhaired blonde boy.

"Uh...yeah..." Harry said, instinctively moving a hand up to try hiding his scar. Before any of the other boys could question him, Harry went and flopped into the bed he assumed was his - his trunk WAS at the foot of it, after all. "Look, I'm... I'm really tired." He said, smiling apologetically to the four boys. "We can talk tomorrow..."

"He's probably right." Said one of the others. "Sleep now. We can get all chummy tomorrow."

Thankful that he had a bit of support, Harry shut his eyes. Without even having bothered to get changed, Harry fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

Chapter 9 – Strange Encounters

"Look! There he is!"

"Is that really him?"

"He's SO... SO THIN!"

"Loo' a' 'is fore'ead!"

Harry let out a sigh. Ever since he and Tonks had set out from Ravenclaw Tower that morning, students had been whispering about him, pointing him out, and otherwise making him quite uncomfortable. Tonks had put a hand on her friend's shoulder as she watched these events unfold, quite aware of how much Harry disliked his popularity. But in the end, neither could do anything. And so, both decided to simply try and ignore it all.

"Down this way, right?" Tonks asked Harry to cover up the noise of a pair of third year Hufflepuffs pointing and giggling at him.

"I think so... does this bloody place HAVE to be so... so..." Harry trailed off, waving a hand vaguely.

"Confusing to navigate?" Tonks offered.

"Confusing to navigate." Harry repeated, nodding. "First we got held up at that staircase that kept vanishing and reappearing, then we took a wrong turn and wound up back at the Tower, THEN we nearly got bowled over by Peeves..."

"Not a good morning for us." Tonks agreed, shaking her head. "No offense, mate, but I think you're a right bad luck magnet."

"Gee, thanks." Harry replied.

Tonks shrugged. "S'true, isn't it? Anyway, look, that's the door that leads out into the Entrance Hall. Hopefully we aren't TOO late for breakfast."

Harry and Tonks crossed the Great Hall, pointedly ignoring as more students gasped and pointed at Harry. As the two made their way into the Great Hall, Harry let out a sigh. "This is never going to get any easier, is it?"

"Ah, sure it will!" Tonks replied, wheeling Harry towards the Ravenclaw table. "Once they get to know ya like I do, they'll see that you're just like them. Ooh, lookit, they have apple pie on the table! Mum'd have a fit."

Sitting down beside one another, the two Ravenclaw students began piling food onto their plates. In the middle of a conversation about the school's Quidditch pitch, Professor McGonagall passed by them, dropping off two slips of parchment. Raising an eyebrow, Tonks gazed at hers, scowled, and nearly choked on a bit of bacon. "Oh hell." She swore, making a face.

"What?" Harry asked, picking up his and looking it over as well. "Oh, class schedules... so what were y-- ...oh, hell."

"Double Potions with the Slytherins. Hoo-rah and joy." Tonks muttered, casting a glance back at the Slytherin table. "The great ponce isn't here yet. Probably's too used to being served breakfast in bed at home. Hope he gets here too late and has to go without."

"You'd get no complaints from me if it happened." Harry said, shaking his head. "So, let's see... we've got McGonagall first thing after breakfast tomorrow, then Quirrell in the afternoon. Day after it's Flitwick and Sprout. Then Binns. Then Snape...and his lovely Double Potions class. At least it isn't until the end of the week."

"Small comfort that is." Tonks said with a scowl.

The two finished eating quickly, deciding to have a look at the grounds. As they had been eating, both Harry and Tonks had overheard a fifth year Gryffindor mention that some kind of giant squid was out doing the backstroke in the lake. The two had promptly headed outside and started to trek down to the lake in question.

"What's a giant squid doing HERE?" Tonks wondered aloud. "They're fairly rare, I think."

"If you had the choice, wouldn't you want to live here, too?" Harry asked, hands in his pockets. "It IS nice...if you get around the fact that you're a walking display."

Tonks smiled crookedly and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Shall I chuck a rock at them, then?"

The two had noticed that, at SOME point, a pair of second-year Gryffindor girls had started trailing behind them a ways.

Harry waved a hand dismissively. "Not unless I can start to hear them giggling or talking about me. Honestly, I'm not going anywhere. They'll have the same shot at seeing me every day for the rest of the school year..."

"Yeah, but Harry, you hafta look at it from their point for a bit. I mean, you single-handedly got rid of the most powerful Dark Wizard since that Grindelbilly guy." Tonks explained.

"Grindlewald." Harry corrected.

"Whatever. The point is, you're a hero to most Wizarding families. Even I was a bit starstruck when I saw you. 'Course, you weren't in the best o' states at the time." Said Tonks, whose hair suddenly changed from short and blonde to long and black. "Whatcha think? Does it match the robes better? Or would blue hair be a better choice?"

Harry blinked. "Uh... I dunno..." He said, a bit nervously. "Hey, when are we going to start seeing about MY Metamorphmagus possibility?"

"Oh yeah... hey, tell ya what. If we don't get a load of homework by the weekend, we'll sit around somewhere quiet and practice, alright?" Tonks said, grinning.

Harry, for possibly the first time that morning, gave Tonks a smile in return. "Works for me. Oi, look - what's the squid flinging?"

The two had reached the water's edge. Peering out, they could see the giant squid chucking something vaguely blue high into the air. The thrown object would twist around in midair and splash back into the water.

"Merman." Tonks said simply. "Seen all sorts o' pictures in one o' Mum's books. I guess the squid likes 'em. Or...they like the squid. Or somethin'."

The two sat down, laying back on the cool grass and watched the little event. After a while, Harry shut his eyes as a lazy breeze passed by. Smiling, and feeling more than a bit sleepy now that his breakfast was beginning to settle, Harry murmured, "This really is nice..."

Tonks looked down at her friend, tilting her head to one side. "What is? Seeing a giant squid sling mermen into the air?"

"No, no...THIS... Hogwarts, magic... all of it. I don't think I've ever felt so relaxed... even if I AM the spectacle of the whole student body. I know I'm SAFE here, you know? Aside from maybe a few Slytherins and Malfoy...who I already know I can take down... no one here would try coming after me or hurting me..." Harry said, crossing his arms behind his head. "It's just... nice."

"It is nice." Tonks finally agreed. "Seeing you happy makes ME happy." She added with a solemn nod. "You've spent waaaay too much time in a bad situation. S'time you loosened up and had some fun!" And then, quietly, she muttered, "Not that having a Potions class with Malfoy and his Idiot Squadron is fun, but..."

Harry let out a lazy chuckle suddenly. "Been waiting to get here since I learned about it... so whatta I do when I arrive? Spend the morning out here instead of in there."

Tonks stretched out beside her friend, gazing up at the clouds as they slowly floated by. "At least out here we won't fall down a staircase if it decides to bugger off."

Harry laughed. "Is it your mum that keeps that kind of language in

check, or are you just feeling a bit more free here?"

"Little o' Column A, little o' Column B." Tonks replied, grinning. "Hey, lookit, Harry! That cloud looks like Malfoy kicked in the jubbies by a gnome!"

Harry snorted, cracking an eye open and following Tonks' outstretched hand. Upon seeing the cloud in question, he grinned. "Pink bits' indeed."

"RED bits."

The two looked at each other, paused, then dissolved into giggles.

After morning had faded and lunch had been eaten, Harry and Tonks decided to explore the castle a bit. Harry wanted to because he didn't want to be late to any of his classes - Snape's especially. Tonks wanted to because it was a chance to search for hidden passageways and secret doors.

It was in this manner that a pair of eleven year olds found themselves wandering down a very dark corridor that twisted away from the main dungeons. It was dreadfully cold and poorly lit, the only illumination coming from magical torches that were spaced too far apart to be of any real use.

Harry was also expanding his vocabulary, as Tonks had randomly let loose a quiet string of swearing that would have made a sailor blush. "COLD down here!" She grumbled darkly. "Let's go back, Harry, I'm freezing my butt off!"

Harry let out an amused whistle and shook his head. "Where on Earth did you learn THAT?" He asked, inspecting an old, metal door. He shivered when his hand came in contact with it and his handprint was left behind in the dust that seemed to be coating the whole area.

"Uncle Jack. Use ta come an' play chess with my Dad when..." Tonks trailed off slowly.

"When...' what?" Harry asked, turning to look at the girl.

Tonks hugged herself and sighed, making a face. "...When he was still around. C'mon, Harry... I know ya hadta wonder where my old man was, didn'tcha?"

"Well... maybe once or twice, but... I didn't want to be rude or anything..." Harry admitted, tilting his head. "Feel like talking about it, or...?"

"Nah, it's okay. Left when I was nine, he did." Tonks explained. "He was always gambling, see. Bit of a habit, I guess it was. He blew a TON of money once, right before Christmas. Wasn't a very Happy Christmas THAT year, I'll tell ya right now. Mum was right mad at him for it, too. Told him that if he couldn't get his habit under control, he could shove off. S'just what he did, too. For awhile, he'd stop by every weekend to see me. Then it was every other weekend. Then once a month."

Tonks shivered again and scowled. "Let's head back, alright?"

Harry nodded and the two turned around and began walking the way they came from.

"Anyway... Dad just stopped comin' by, eventually. Mum seemed kinda sad for awhile, but then she got promoted at work...an' that took up a good chunk of her time. Was good for her, too. She seemed happier when she came home...an' the promotion raised her pay, too. We certainly weren't complainin' about THAT." Tonks continued, grinning. "We got on great after that, just the two of us. Haven't heard from Dad in about a year or so now. Dunno what I'd say or do if I saw him again, though."

Harry nodded, taking in his friend's story and thinking it over. After awhile, he began, "Still, I think you're pretty lucky. Given what kinda guardians I had, though..." Harry shook his head, then went on, "You know what I mean. You know, I don't even know what my parents LOOK like? My aunt and uncle didn't have any photographs of them around or anything..."

"S'too bad, mate." Tonks said. "Hey, maybe we can ask Dumbledore

if he knows anyone that has a photo or two t'spare, huh? He's old enough, I'm sure he was headmaster back THEN, too."

Harry blinked. "Hey, yeah... Dunno why I never thought o' that..."

Tonks smirked. "Well, s'prolly 'cause you're as thick as that clam chowder that Mum tried making that one day."

"Thanks a lot." Harry replied before sticking out his tongue and shuddering. "And don't remind me o' that stuff. We really should've just said how gross it was. My stomach's still not forgiven me for eating that."

"Same here. Ah, look. We're free! Let's go back to the common room, 'kay? I wanna warm up." Tonks said, rubbing her arms to try and ward the coldness away.

"Sure, I'm k-- hell, HIDE!" Harry said, suddenly grabbing Tonks by her shoulders and tugging her into a little alcove towards the end (or was it the beginning) of the chilly corridor.

"Harry, what...?!" Tonks began, but Harry put a finger to his lips to indicate for her to keep quiet. Her brow creased, but after a moment, she understood why they were hiding. There were voices. Voices that sounded angry. Voices that were steadily approaching.

"--d-don't know what you're t-talking about!"

"Don't play dumb with me! Everyone else may fall for your act, but I shall NOT! You know NOTHING! I would be much better suited for--"

Harry and Tonks exchanged a glance.

'Snape?' Tonks mouthed. Harry nodded, then mouthed, 'Quirrell.'

"Really, S-Severus, I...I know you don't like me, but...but..."

"But nothing!" Snarled Snape. "And if you don't say anything--"

The voices trailed off as the two teachers stormed their way past the

entrance to the corridor the two Ravenclaws were hiding in. After a few moments of listening to the arguing voices fade, Harry and Tonks came out of the alcove.

"That was weird." Tonks said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Nice temper, Snape. Friday's going to be just lovely." Harry said, sighing. "Come on, let's get out of here before they come back."

The two quickly left the corridor, then the dungeons entirely, making their way back towards Ravenclaw Tower. As they did, the two talked about the odd argument.

"Guess he's mad that Quirrell won't retire or somethin'." Tonks suggested.

"Quirrell does seem a bit dodgy, doesn't he?" Harry asked, frowning. "Wonder what Defense Against the Dark Arts is going to be like..."

"Wonder if he'll be able to teach us anything between stutters." Tonks said. "Guess we'll find out tomorrow, huh?"

"Yeah..." Harry said, fishing around in his robes and pulling out his schedule. "Whatcha think Flying class will be like? Looks like it's this week only..."

Tonks shrugged. "It's something to look forward to. You hear what those fourth years were saying about History of Magic this morning?"

"Yeah. Couldn't they have made our schedules so we'd have at least one interesting class in the second half of the week?" Harry asked, slipping the paper away. "The way they were going on, you'd think that you could just fall asleep in class an' still get away with good marks."

"So we're going to be put to sleep, then we get to go ride brooms. Yeah, that's not a dangerous combination in the making." Tonks said with a sigh.

"Lucidus Susceptor." Harry said as they arrived at the portrait of

Walter the Wise. The ancient-looking wizard in the portrait smiled up at the two from where he was sitting, reading a rather sizable book. "Right you are." He said, his portrait swinging open. Harry and Tonks headed through and into the Ravenclaw common room.

"Mmmm, heat heat heat heat heat!" Tonks said, bouncing her way over to the semi-circular couch and flopping down on it. With a cat-like purr, the girl stretched once and promptly groaned. "Mmm, gotta stop doing that. My spine doesn't like it." She said.

Rolling his eyes, Harry sat at one end of the couch, a few spaces down from Tonks. "I don't like it, either. I've done a few of those stretches, too."

"Oi, Harry."

"Hm?"

"You notice something strange on our way back up?"

"Strange? Tonks, everything seems strange to me - remember where I came from."

"No, I mean... look, I think someone was following us!"

"What?"

Tonks sat up with a yawn, draping her arms over the back of the couch and looking over at Harry. "You didn't notice? Wasn't one of your fanclub, either. Was a guy. Looked like a Gryffindor, too."

Harry blinked. "What would another guy from Gryffindor want from me?"

Tonks shrugged. "Dunno, but he seemed real careful of keeping himself hidden. Saw him out of the corner of my eye a few times when we went around corners."

"Not good enough to know what he looked like, huh?"

"Nah. Hey, maybe we'll luck out an' he'll do it again when we go down
for supper."

"Oh, huzzah."

Tonks giggled, scooting down the couch and playfully slugging Harry
in the arm. "Aww, c'mon, ickle Harrykins. I'll pwotect you fwom the big,
bad Gwyffindoh stalkehyyy...."

Harry scowled, swatting at Tonks' hand, sticking his tongue out at her.
"Quiet, you. Or I'll..."

"You'll what? Hex me?"

"Yeah!"

"With what?! You don't know any spells yet, ya silly sod!"

Harry opened his mouth. Then he closed it. Then he opened it again.
Then he closed it. He then scowled and stuck out his tongue once
more. "I hate you."

Tonks grinned, slinging an arm around Harry and giving him a quick,
one-armed hug. "Aww, don't pout, mate. After what you did to Malfoy,
I'm perfectly sure you're capable of slugging anyone that bugs ya too
much."

"Ah, the look on his face." Harry said, grinning as the memory
resurfaced.

"Didn't think ya had it in ya, y'know. That punch came outta nowhere,
too. I'm surprised y'didn't hurt your knuckles any more than y'did,
though." Tonks said.

Harry blushed slightly, though for the life of him, he didn't know just
why. "Yeah, well... he was insulting you, wasn't he? You're the first
real friend I've ever had."

Tonks grinned even wider. "You're bluuuushiiiiing, Harryyyy..."

"What? I am not!" Harry said, rubbing at his cheeks and frowning.

"Are so."

"Am not."

"Are so."

"Am not."

"Are so."

"Am so."

"Are not. ...Wait, damn. Don't do that!" Tonks said, slugging Harry's arm again and sticking HER tongue out. Harry smirked a triumphant smirk, gazing off towards the fire. All throughout the common room, various students were lounging around and talking, though it did seem rather empty at the moment.

"Everyone must be wanderin' around like we were." Tonks said, giving the room a once-over. "Hope they don't run across Snape and Quirrell, too."

"Oi, Tonks."

"Hm?"

"Plan on keeping your arm around me all day or somethin'?"

Tonks blinked, then shrugged and removed her arm from around Harry's shoulders. "Why? You scared someone's gonna think you're my boyfriend for REAL? I s'pose I COULD pull that act again, if ya wanted. Might help keep some of those fangirls of yours away."

"That... or they'd hunt you down as one giant lynch mob." Harry replied blandly. "S'your call. I just didn't want people to get the wrong impression. The last thing I need is to get pulled aside after classes and asked, over and over, if we're going out or something. No offense, Tonks."

"None taken."

#####

"I hate that poltergeist!"

"You hate him? You didn't get a water balloon to the face!"

"No, but he nearly made me break my ankle!"

"McGonagall's gonna be mad."

"McGonagall hasn't looked anything BUT mad since we got here!"

"That's entirely beside the point! C'mon, it's this one!"

Tonks (who was limping slightly) and Harry (who was somewhat drenched) made their way into Professor McGonagall's classroom, finding it almost filled to capacity with students who had gotten there on time. It didn't seem as if the Professor was there yet, though. Tonks let herself grin aside to Harry. "Looks like we made it, after all."

But as the two began walking towards an empty spot, a cat (who neither had noticed sitting on the Professor's desk) leapt to the ground and promptly changed forms. Harry nearly keeled over backwards. Tonks let out a surprised 'yip!' but otherwise kept herself upright.

Professor McGonagall surveyed the two tardy students slowly before asking, "And why, may I ask, are the two of you late?"

"Peeves." Tonks offered, motioning towards Harry.

After a moment of pause, McGonagall sighed and pulled out her wand, swishing it once in Harry's direction. Instantly, the raven-haired boy was dry again. He blinked, patting himself down, before offering the woman a faint smile and saying, "Thanks."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Potter. Now sit down, both of you. And be

glad it was only Peeves that made you late." McGonagall said, turning and walking back to her desk.

"Now that we're all here..." Here the Professor gave Tonks and Harry a pointed look. "We may begin. Welcome to Transfiguration...."

#####

"Hey, Tonks."

"Yeah?"

"Make a note to add a new entry into The List once we get back to the common room. I want to make Peeves trail Malfoy for a whole day or something."

Tonks grinned, shaking her head as the two exited McGonagall's classroom. Harry was in a considerably better mood now that he had actually been able to perform a bit of magic. They had spent the whole of the first class trying to change sewing needles into miniature quills. Harry hadn't quite gotten the hang of it – his needle had sprouted a handful of tiny feathers that had refused to stay attached.

Tonks, on the other hand, managed to get a writing tip onto her needle. But it had tried spitting ink at her at one point, at which she squeaked and ducked. The ink flew over where she had been, letting Terry Boot get a face full.

The two were on their way toward the Great Hall for lunch when, out of the corner of her eye, Tonks spotted something. Barely opening her mouth, she murmured, "Oi, we're being followed again. S'that Gryffindor again. No, don't look! We can see who he is after we get inna the Great Hall..."

Harry nodded slightly and the two proceeded down the main staircase. "Hope he doesn't want t'ask me a bunch of questions." Harry said quietly. "Not like I remember anything about... about that time..."

Tonks remained silent. She knew that Harry still thought back to the

night his parents had died. Ever since he had been told of it, he had periodically been subject to nightmares of the event. Before, he had just dreamt of a bright, green light from time to time.

Harry and Tonks entered the Great Hall shortly thereafter, heading towards the nearest end of the Ravenclaw table. Trying to make themselves look interesting in the food in front of them, they made sure to note everyone who walked into the room. And the first Gryffindor student to enter was...

"There!" Tonks hissed from around a bite of roll.

A nervous-looking redheaded boy was entering the Great Hall. His eyes immediately went to the Ravenclaw table and, indeed, to where Harry and Tonks were sitting. Harry made a noise that sounded like an irritated grunt in his throat, muttering, "I'm gonna go see what he wants. Wanna come with?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

Harry made eye contact, making the redhead freeze up. The two stood and walked toward him, causing him to backpeddle slightly.

"Now then," Tonks began as they drew near, "You gonna tell us why you've been followin' us around since yesterday, or do we gotta smack it outta ya? Harry has a mean right hook."

The boy squeaked, looking from Tonks to Harry...then up to Harry's forehead. "Are... are you... REALLY...?" He began.

"That's right." Harry said. "I'm Harry Potter. No, I can't tell you how I did what I did. No, my life hasn't been riches and glory. And no, I don't like all of the attention. That should cover any basic questions..."

The boy blinked, eyes flickering to the Gryffindor table briefly. "I...I wasn't going to... I mean, I just wanted to know..."

"You Professor Quirrell's kid or somethin'?" Tonks asked, raising an eyebrow. At this, the boy made a face, standing up a bit straighter.

"Course I'm not. Do I look like him? My name's Ron. Ron Weasley."

"Weasley..." Tonks repeated, frowning slightly.

"Ring a bell?" Harry asked, looking to his friend.

"Kinda. Mum's mentioned that name a time or two..." Tonks said, looking at Ron. "Oi, anyone in your family work at the Ministry?"

"My dad does." Ron said. "Misuse of Muggle Artifacts..."

"Hm... must have been in passing, then. Mum doesn't work there..." Tonks said, shrugging. "Anyway... whatcha been followin' us for?"

Ron opened his mouth, then paused. A little embarrassed, he shrugged and murmured, "Just wanted to see if it was really him, that's all. Mum was going on and on about him before we left this year. Told us to 'not ask him anything stupid'... Like I was gonna come up and ask if he knew how he beat... how he beat You-Know-Who..."

"Voldemort?" Harry asked, his mind slipping for a moment.

Ron gaped. "Y...you... you said..."

Tonks slapped her forehead, then turned to whisper into Harry's ear, "Watch it! Remember what I said about his name? No one likes hearin' it!"

Harry scowled. "Do you think I do? He did murder my parents, Tonks. But he's gone now, and I'm not going to let a memory spook me."

"Wow..." Ron breathed, blinking at Harry. "Only person I've ever heard to say his name before was Dumbledore... he had to stop by our house over the Christmas Holidays once when Fred and George practically blew up one of the prefect bathrooms..."

"Fred and George?" Harry asked.

"Older brothers. They're twins." Ron explained, turning and pointing

the two pranksters out to Harry and Tonks. "Those two. Can't miss 'em. ...Don't take anything to eat that they offer you, by the way."

"Why?"

"They like messing with things. Couple o' regular jokers, those two. They keep saying that they'll put Zonko's out of business one of these days." Ron said, shaking his head. "Mental, they are."

"Oh, hey! Hi, you two. Haven't seen you in awhile!" Came a voice from behind the trio. They turned to see Dean Thomas walking into the Great Hall, grinning. "Ron, you know Harry and Tonks, too?"

"Uh...well, kinda. Just met, in fact..." Ron said, sounding nervous once more.

"Met 'em on the train." Dean said, smirking.

"Whatta you mean, 'awhile'? We've only been here two days!" Tonks exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, well. That counts as 'awhile,' doesn't it?" Dean asked.

Harry groaned. "Right, you three keep on. I'm going to go eat. I want to set off for Quirrell's class early, in case that bloody poltergeist shows up again."

Dean winced. "Met Peeves, huh?"

"You could say that." Harry said darkly. "Only I was on the receiving end of a water balloon before McGonagall's class."

Ron and Dean both winced at this. "Ouch." Said the latter. "Have fun with Quirrell, Harry. You'll spend most of his class waiting for him to spit out what he's trying to say."

"You've had him already?" Tonks asked.

Ron chimed in at this, looking to Dean, then to Tonks and Harry. "Yeah. First thing. Took five whole minutes for him to give out our first

assignment at the end of class, too. Doubt he knows the first thing about Dark Arts, if you ask me."

"Lovely." Harry said with a sigh. "Well, if you two'll excuse us..."

"Right, I'm starving, too." Dean said, rubbing his stomach. "Though I think I'm gonna be avoiding anything with garlic in it for awhile. Quirrell's classroom positively stinks with the stuff."

"Paranoid about vampires, he is." Ron added.

Harry and Tonks exchanged a look before saying goodbye to the two Gryffindors and heading back to their table. "Well," Harry began, sitting down and reaching for his goblet of pumpkin juice. "That was informative."

"Yeah." Agreed Tonks. "You have a red-haired fanboy with a pair of brothers that we really need to get to know, apparently... and we should be glad we have Quirrell AFTER lunch."

Harry looked to the Gryffindor table, eyeballing the Weasley twins.

"Harry? ...Harry, I know that look. What're you thinking?"

Harry grinned aside to Tonks. "Well, Ron said his brothers are a pair of jokers, right? Said they almost blew up a bathroom, yeah? Well... what if we flagged them down sometime and asked if they had any ideas on additions to The List?"

Tonks' eyes lit up. "Hey, yeah! Four heads are better than two! We can hunt 'em down this weekend after we get in some Metamorphmagus training for ya, how 'bout?"

"Sounds like a plan." Harry said, trying not to laugh as one Draco Malfoy entered the Great Hall, swaggering as if he were more important than everyone else.

"This is gonna be FUN."

#####

Author's Notes: FFN sucks. Even with someone formatting my original .txt files, FFN still

doesn't show them with the formatting I wrote them with. Hence why things look a bit on

the strange side. Sorry about that, all. x.x Anyway, I'm astounded at the mass amount of

comments I've gotten on this already. OO; Trust me, it helps knowing that people want to

read more when you're sitting there with writer's block. 10 should be out within a week

or so.

Chapter 10 – Secrets Abound

"Why did I know we were gonna run into that poltergeist again!"

"Because I'm famous and he seems to fancy chasing me around!"

"Right. Remind me to wait a bit before following you to class!"

"Thanks a lot."

Harry and Tonks burst into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom less than two minutes before class was set to begin. Once again, they had run afoul of Peeves, who had tried unsuccessfully to drenched the duo. The two looked around as they caught their breath. Harry frowned.

"Looks like we won't be sitting next to each other this time." He said quietly, noting that only two spots were open - one next to a boy with frighteningly long, black hair, the other next to a girl with blonde hair and entirely too much makeup.

Harry and Tonks exchanged a glance.

"I'll be your friend if you take the girl." Harry murmured quietly. Tonks rolled her eyes and grumbled, "Fine, fine...but you owe me."

The two separated, each filling one of the empty seats.

As Harry sat, the boy beside him offered a tired sort-of smile at him. Harry returned it politely. "Ravenclaw, too?" Harry asked softly. The boy nodded, brushing a rogue strand of hair away from his eyes. Eyes, Harry noted now, seemed to almost be a golden color.

"You'd be Harry Potter, then?" Asked the boy.

Harry nodded. "And you are...?"

The boy paused, making a bit of a face before replying, "My full name is Solieyu Reinhardt, but... please, just call me Leon..."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Impressive name."

"To everyone but myself." Leon said, grinning crookedly. "I'm afraid my mother went a bit overboard when it came time to name me..."

"Sounds like it. Don't think I've seen you around..." Harry said, looking over Leon's shoulder at a grimacing Tonks.

"Yes, well, I tend to keep to myself a lot. I tend to sleep poorly, so I'm usually up, reading, at night." Solieyu explained, leaning back in his chair. "We share the same dorm, I just tend to fall asleep down in the common room..."

"Ahh..." Said Harry. "I haven't really gotten to know anyone else in the dorm, truth be told... I...guess I'm trying to wait for some of this... fame, or whatever, wear off..."

Solieyu chuckled. "Don't care for the attention?"

"Hate it."

As Solieyu was about to reply, the door to the room opened and Professor Quirrell entered, looking more than a little disheveled. Staggering to the desk at the front of the classroom, Quirrell licked his lips and turned to face his students - a mixture of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff children, to be exact - and attempted to smile. "W-Welcome to D-Defense Against the D-Dark Arts." He said in his stutter. "M-My name is Professor Quirrell..."

Harry and Tonks exchanged another glance across the room as the nervous teacher attempted to spit out what the year's lesson plan would be. It took a good ten minutes for him to explain that it would be little more than a general overview and introduction to the subject and, as long as he was there, no practical tests would be performed.

He then dissolved into a painfully-long speech about what, exactly, the Dark Arts were. "N-Now... D-Dark Arts are just that - Dark. I-I hope none of you ever h-have to deal with them, b-but...my job is to p-p...prepare you in case the need arises..."

Quirrell had the class open their books to page 13, where a history of Dark Arts began. The class read the next few pages to themselves as Quirrell busied himself with something on his desk. After a few

moments of reading, Harry heard Solieyu let out an almost inaudible sigh. Leaning in close, Harry whispered, "Something wrong?"

Solieyu blinked at Harry as if he had a giant wart on his face. Recovering quickly, however, he shook his head and mouthed, 'boring.'

Rolling his eyes, Harry resumed reading. He didn't think the subject was boring. In fact, he found it rather intriguing. But then, he was beginning to think that he would find *all* the subjects interesting. He blamed his horrible background for it. And, somewhere in the back of his mind, he had a lingering desire to figure out what twit came up with the Avada Kedavra curse that had deprived him of having parents.

Class seemed to pass much quicker than McGonagall's had, much to Harry's dismay. With a good five minutes left, Quirrell looked up and said, "C-Class, I want all of you t-to reread the pages that w-we've just gone over before tomorrow. I'll be asking q-questions after class begins."

The bell sounded then, bringing the class to a close. Harry stood, gathering up his book and tucking it away in the bookbag Andromeda had bought for him. Harry wasn't sure when she had attained the thing, though. It certainly hadn't been during their trip into Diagon Alley.

Beside him, Solieyu did much the same, turning and offering Harry another tired smile. "It was nice meeting you, Harry. You were...different than I had imagined."

"Is that bad?" Harry asked.

"Not at all. In fact, from the stories I had heard, I assumed you might be arrogant. It's nice to see that I was wrong." Solieyu said, hefting his backpack over one shoulder.

"Thanks. I...think." Harry said.

"Wow... it musta taken years to grow that out." Came a familiar voice from the other side of Solieyu. He and Harry turned to see a blonde-

haired Tonks smiling at them. Indeed, now that Solieyu was standing, one could see just how long his jet black hair was. Waist length, if not just slightly longer.

Solieyu smirked slightly. "It's my pride and joy." He said. "Usually, I put it back into a ponytail, but...I was running a bit late today."

"Impressive." Tonks said. She concentrated for a few moments and, with a faint 'pop,' her hair (still blonde) was as long as Solieyu's. She swayed her head back and forth a few times, getting a feel for it, before changing it back to short and spiky. "Best of luck to ya, then. Too much upkeep if y'ask me. So, Harry, ya gonna introduce us, or what?"

Harry blinked. "Uh? Oh... oh, this is going to be fun. Solieyu Reinhardt, meet Nymphadora Tonks."

Quickly, Tonks grumbled "Just 'Tonks,' if ya please. I don't--"

At the exact same time, Solieyu murmured, "Please, call me 'Leon' - my full name is--"

Harry snorted as Solieyu and Tonks blinked. They turned to look at him, causing him to grin. "I'm beginning to think I'm the only one who actually likes his full name." He said.

Tonks rolled her eyes. Solieyu chuckled.

"So, Leon, whatcha got planned for the night?" Tonks asked as the three headed out of the Defense classroom.

Solieyu sighed, shaking his head. "Work, probably. And... ah... I promised my mother I would write. She worries a bit too much. Sends letters if I don't write regularly..."

"Sounds loads o' fun." Tonks said.

"At least me and Leon are getting on well. What happened with you and that girl?" Harry asked.

Tonks scowled suddenly. "Don't get me started. Hufflepuff, she was. Had the most nerve-grating voice I've ever heard, even in a whisper. Kept asking me stupid questions, too. Like I'd know what on Earth advanced Dark Arts are..."

"So, I take it that you two know each other?" Solieyu asked, glancing from Harry to Tonks.

Harry nodded. "Yeah... since the middle of summer. Around then, anyways. She... uh... kinda helped get me out of a bad situation."

"Harry's relatives are prats." Tonks explained simply.

"That isn't a nice thing to say." Solieyu said.

"No, she's right." Harry said, raising his eyebrows. "Worse than that, actually, but... I'd rather not talk about that in the middle of a hallway..."

"Noted." Solieyu said.

As the trio entered the Entrance Hall, Solieyu shifted his backpack to his other shoulder and smiled at the two. "I need to go to the library. I'd like to get something other than my school books to read when I'm up at night. It feels a bit too much like studying otherwise..."

The group parted ways then. Solieyu going up the main staircase while Harry and Tonks headed for the front doors of the school. "What's he mean?" Tonks asked.

"Guess he suffers from insomnia or something." Harry replied, shrugging. "Said he tends not to sleep well and goes to the common room to read. Now that I think about it, I don't think I've seen him in the dorm..."

"Strange." Tonks said, nodding solemnly as the two walked across the grounds and towards the lake. The giant squid wasn't flinging mermen all over the place anymore, but it was still a relaxing place to visit. Several other students were gathered at various points around it, as well. Some looked to be reading, others attempting to wade in the rather cold waters. Some looked half-asleep.

"The sleepers have the right idea." Harry said as they approached.

"Don't you fall asleep out here, Harry Potter." Tonks warned, giving Harry the evil eye. "I know how deep you sleep when you wanna, an' I'm not luggin' you back to the Tower."

"I'm not *that* heavy." Huffed Harry indignantly.

"You're no feather, either." Tonks said dryly as the two sat.

Harry set his bookbag down and stretched out on the slightly-chilly grass, inhaling deeply and smiling. He might not have been at Hogwarts for very long, but he *liked* the lake. It was more relaxing than the common room seemed to be. Though, he thought as he looked up at the slightly-darkened clouds overhead, it might not be calm for long.

Rain looked like it was going to set in before the day was through. Harry had a bit of a love/hate relationship going with rain. On one hand, he used to hate the sound of it falling, back when he was trapped inside his cupboard back at Number Four. It made him think of the outside world - one he never thought he'd get to go and explore.

But ever since he had met Tonks, his view of things had changed somewhat. Now, the thought of rain was comforting. It reminded him of the day he had made his first friend. Harry laughed suddenly, causing Tonks to look down at him and ask, "Wha's so funny?"

Harry opened his eyes and grinned. "Just thinking. I must have looked awful when you found me..."

"Found you? What, y'mean that day in the park when we first met? Yeah, you did look pretty bad. Figured the 'famous Harry Potter' woulda been more... I dunno..." Tonks said, vaguely gesturing with one hand.

"Arrogant?" Harry supplied, smirking faintly.

"Arrogant? Nahh... Actually, I figured you'd look and act a bit like The Royal Ponce does..." Tonks said, rubbing the back of her neck. "Y'know, a high-and-mighty attitude an' all."

"And instead of the prince, you get the pauper." Harry said.

Tonks blinked.

"Muggle story. Heard it on the TV one night after dinner..." Harry explained. "They kept the bloody thing so loud, it drowned out practically every other noise...doorbell included."

"Lovely lot, your relatives." Tonks said, leaning back on her arms.

"Indeed. Remind me to get you something really nice for your birthday, Tonks. For getting me outta that place an' all..."

"I'm gonna holdja t'that." Tonks said.

"By all means."

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"That's two classes down." Tonks said as she and Harry returned to the common room after supper. "Flitwick an' Sprout tomorrow."

"And all we need to do tonight is reread what we went over in Quirrell's class. Which...wasn't much." Harry said, flopping down into a chair towards the back of the room. Tonks sat down in the one opposite his.

"Yeah. Looked like you spent more time talkin' with Leon than actually listening to Quirrell." Tonks said, smirking.

Harry shrugged. "We only talked when Quirrell was stuttering his way to the point..."

"The fact remains."

"Oh, you're just bitter that you got stuck next to that Hufflepuff girl."

"Quiet, you."

"You know, if you two keep going everywhere together, people...*will* start to get the wrong idea." Said a voice just a few feet away. Harry

and Tonks looked up to see one Terry Boot leaning back against the couch, grinning like an idiot.

"Wrong idea?" Harry asked, blinking.

"You know!" Terry said, looking around and speaking in a stage whisper. "That you two are dating!"

Harry cocked an eyebrow and looked back at Tonks, who was looking at him with a similar expression. Looking back to Terry, Harry shook his head and replied, "No way, we're just best friends. No offense, Tonks."

"None taken. It'd be like datin' my nonexistent brother, besides." Tonks added, crossing her arms.

Terry rolled his eyes and hefted himself up straight, heading towards the staircase to the boys' dorms. "Whatever you two say. By the way, Harry, we're gonna be getting together on Saturday night. Gonna sneak out and explore the castle after-hours." He said, grinning as he looked over his shoulder at the duo.

"Who's 'we'?" Harry asked.

"We! Y'know, me, Leon, Gary, an' Chris!"

"Who?"

Terry rolled his eyes and sighed melodramatically. "Your dorm mates, you thick prat. It wouldn't hurt to get to know who you're gonna be spending your sleeping hours around, y'know."

"Er...sorry." Harry said, lowering his head slightly. "I guess I've just been--"

"Avoiding people. Yeah, we've noticed. Anyway, you in?"

"Sure, I guess. What harm could it do?" Harry said, shrugging one shoulder.

"It could lose Ravenclaw a ton of house points, for one." Tonks said. "And there's the chance of detention."

Harry gaped at his friend.

"What?" She asked, huffing. "I wanna beat Slytherin, that's all! I don't care if you lot go get detentions or somethin'. But count me out. Filch caught me changing my hair around yesterday on my way back from the lav - he's right scary, he is. Better evil eye on him than I could muster."

"Girls." Terry said, rolling his eyes again. "Right, I'll go let the others know, then!" And with that, Terry left the common room.

"Men." Scoffed Tonks, pulling a face. "I could take him out in one swing if I wanted. No way he weighs more'n I do!"

Harry, wisely, kept himself out of the conversation until Tonks had ranted herself out.

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"Well, nice that everyone's decided to show up." Terry said as Harry entered the first year boys' dorm later that night. Harry surveyed the room quickly. Solieyu and the two other boys that were named Chris and Gary were sitting on their respective beds, apparently waiting for Harry's arrival.

"Wasn't aware I was needed." Harry grumbled, heading for his own bed and sitting on the edge. "I'll assume this is about Saturday?"

"Bingo." Terry said, smirking. "Figured I'd wait until everybody got in here to discuss what we'd be doing."

"Well, I dunno about us, but *you* should keep clear of Tonks for awhile." Harry said, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Isn't too happy with you at the moment."

"Er...right..." Terry said, frowning. "Anyway, since we haven't all been properly introduced - I'm Terry Boot, that's Chris Ericson, that's Gary Haskit, an' that's Sol--"

"We've met." Solieyu said with an equally ghostly smile.

"You have?" Terry said, blinking. "Well, that's good. Anyway, this is our ever-elusive fifth wheel, Harry Potter! Say hello, Harry."

"Hello, Harry." Replied Harry in a monotone. He was beginning to get annoyed at Terry's perpetually upbeat personality.

"Right then, now that *that's* out to the way, on to business! I thought, as first years, we should get ourselves a bit more acquainted with the castle! So this Saturday at midnight, if all of you can stay awake that long--" Here, Terry glared at Chris and Gary, who bowed their heads to avoid his gaze --"we'll sneak out and explore for an hour or three! With five of us out, the chance that Filch'll catch all of us is pretty slim. If he does get sight of us, scatter like your lives depended on it! With any luck, only one or two of us'll wind up with detention!"

'Hope it's you'. Thought Harry, darkly.

"Are we just gonna roam about aimlessly, or didja actually have a route set, Terry?" Asked Chris Ericson.

"Glad you asked, mate! We are gonna go explore that off-limits corridor that Dumbledore talked about!" Terry said, excitement positively oozing from his voice.

"Lovely, so you want us to not only risk getting detention and/or house points being deducted, you want us to risk our *lives*. Real nice, Terry." Gary Haskit commented, rolling his eyes.

"C'mon, don't be thick, do you *really* think Dumbledore's got somethin' up there that could kill us? They wouldn't have something so dangerous here! It's a bloody school, mate!" Terry said, rolling his own eyes.

"And if they *do* have something that dangerous?" Piped in Solieyu, who was sitting with his arms crossed and his eyes shut.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it!" Terry said.

"I'm not." Said Eric. "And the resta you lot will be, too, if you've got any sense in ya."

"Traitor!" Terry said, pouting. "Come on, Eric, where's your sense of adventure!"

"Trapped by my sense of survival, I'm afraid." Replied Eric. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Anyone else gonna wimp out on me?" Terry asked, slightly annoyed.

"I'm not sure I'll, ah... be quite up for it." Solieyu said, eyes opened halfway now. "It... depends on how my health is, I suppose."

After a moment, Terry nodded. "Yeah... I guess we don't want any sick people coming with us. Don't wanna spew and give our location away or somethin'..."

Solieyu made a face. "I'm going to bed soon, Terry. Could we please not go down this road right now?"

"Ah, whatever... Gary? Harry? You two still in?" Terry asked, his eyes pleading as they moved from Harry to Gary and back again.

"Ah, why not?" Gary said, grinning. "Can't let you go off and get killed on your own, now can I?"

"Too right. Harry?" Terry said, turning to the boy in question.

"I'm with Leon. I didn't come here to go places that might cost me my life. I've put up with too much to throw it away. You should've said something earlier." Harry said, slowly. "I'll think it over, but I'm not going down that corridor."

"Hmph. Cowards, the lot of you!" Terry said, outright scowling now. "At least Gary isn't a chicken."

"There's a difference between cowardice and stupidity, Terry." Said Solieyu, voice calm. "If you go there and manage to come back intact, then, perhaps, we'll go. However, I don't really see the point in

blindly throwing ourselves into a potentially dangerous area if we don't have to."

"Lotta big words." Eric said, laying down and stretching out on his bed. "But he's got a point."

Harry nodded in agreement and, ignoring Terry's muttered comments about his, Eric's, and Solieyu's lack of manhood, layed down as well. Crossing an arm over his head, Harry groaned. It was going to be a *long* year with this lot. Briefly, Harry hoped that Professor Flitwick would teach them some silencing charms at some point.

He was going to need them.

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Author's Notes: I know, short chapter. I needed to get it outta the way, though. Now then, I figured I'd go over a couple of points that I've seen in my reviews.

1) Why do Harry and Tonks dislike Snape if they haven't even been to one of his classes yet? It's Snape, man! Look at him! You see that face staring at you the wrong way, you'd instantly get bad vibes from the guy, too. Remember, our duo is still young. What you hear from other people can go a long way into how you judge a man.

2) Why is Tonks the same age as Harry? Simple - it's an AU fic. I couldn't convincingly think of a plot for a canonical pairing of the two, even though I love 'em. So the solution was to simply (Simply? Hah!) rewrite all the books with a twist - Tonks gets to be the same age as Harry. Age regression at its finest, ladies and gents! Besides, writing Chibi-Tonks is so much fun! She speaks her mind and isn't afraid to tell people what she thinks. And I get to throw a bit of slang-y speak in there. Tomboy!Tonks, huzzah!

3) What's up with Ron? Welllll, he never met Harry on the train, now did he? Harry only just MET Ron at the school. Rumors spread fast around the school, and the way I see it, Ron just wanted to get a good look at the guy to see what he's like. I openly admit my dislike of Ron as a character, but I'll TRY to keep him as canonical as possible.

Though if he does happen to randomly sprout rabbit ears and is forced to hop around school all day. well...

Anyway, that's enough of my blathering for this chapter. Next chapter features Charms and Herbology. The one after that gets History of Magic and the Flying Class (Yay!) and then... then we get to the fun stuff. Potions on Friday with the Great Git himself!

I'm utterly amazed at the amount of reviews I've gotten in such a short time. And as I've said elsewhere, they really do help to keep me going. This is gonna be a LONG haul, folks. I'm gonna redo the chapter guide tonight now that I've thrown Solieyu into the mix (cookies if you guess where all three of his names come from!)--because I've got something special planned for him. More cookies if you can figure out what it is!

February 06 update: Jeez, now I see what people meant by awful formatting. I honestly have no idea what happened here. The first 9 chapters were fine and then SPLAT, here we are. Gonna go back through and fix this. Stupid FFN must've changed how formatting works or something, because things honestly looked fine to me when they were uploaded. Ach, I've got a long bit of work here...

Chapter 11 – The Passing of the List

"Terry's insane."

"A right oddball."

"I wonder whether he or Gary will be caught first..."

"Terry will. He's too bloody loud *not* to be. I bet he walks around, talking at the top of his voice with each new discovery."

"Bets should be placed!"

"I'm glad that at least three of my dorm mates are sane."

Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu were heading down from Ravenclaw Tower the following day, various book containers being toted along over shoulders. The boys had filled Tonks in on their impromptu meeting the night before. Tonks, though admitting that she wanted to know what Dumbledore was hiding, certainly didn't want to go searching for it. She didn't want to find just *HOW* dangerous the potentially dangerous unknown was, just she was curious, nonetheless.

"Well, at least the majority of us can think before we act." Harry said, voice toneless. "I wonder what condition they'll wind up in."

"It won't be good." Solieyu said, shaking his head.

The trio walked along in silence, heading towards their head of house's class - Charms. As they climbed the main staircase, Solieyu let out a long yawn. The other two looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"Didn't sleep well?" Tonks asked.

Solieyu chuckled softly. "I'm afraid not. I...ah... spent a good deal of time wondering whether or not I should mention something to Professor Flitwick... as annoying as he seems to be, I don't want to lose one of my dorm mates. It kept me up a bit later than I should have been..."

"It's his own fault if he loses a limb." Harry said. "We tried to warn him. No one can say we didn't."

"True." Solieyu said, sighing. "But it would be a shame, nonetheless, if we lost either of them."

"Mm." Harry grunted. "Oi, one of you two counting? This should be the third floor, yeah?"

Tonks chanced a peek over the railing of the stairs, shuddering a bit and nodding. "Seems like it."

"Why the shudder?" Solieyu asked.

"You kiddin'? Ever tried starin' down the center of the staircase? S'got this weird effect on me, at least." Tonks said, frowning.

The trio headed off of the main staircase and began hunting around for the Charms corridor. Tonks was the one to point out the right way to go to the boys, who had been arguing about going down two different hallways altogether. Grabbing each of her male friends by the ears, Tonks proceeded to all but drag them down and to the Charms classroom.

"There! Now don'tcha forget!" Tonks said, taking the nearest empty seat.

Harry and Solieyu scowled and rubbed their sore ears. Harry took a seat in front of Tonks' and Solieyu took the seat beside Harry's. Harry looked over his shoulder and eyed Tonks warily. "Don't you go and do anything funny back there..." He said.

"Who, me? Naw, I'm a sweet, innocent angel, I am!" Tonks said, batting her eyelashes at Harry in a nauseatingly-cute way.

Harry exchanged a glance at Solieyu and the two rubbed at their ears once more.

"Ah! Are we all here? Let me see here..." Came a voice from the front of the room. Half of the class jumped. Professor Flitwick, it seemed, had entered at some point and had crossed the room, hopping up

onto the stack of books behind his desk. "Now... let's begin by taking the roll. When I call your name, please respond..."

Professor Flitwick went down the list of names, looking up after each one to give the student answering a jovial smile and nod. When he reached Harry's name, he gave an excited squeak and nearly fell off his pile of books. "Potter, Harry!"

"Present." Replied Harry, raising an eyebrow.

"Ah, so good to have you! Very proud that you made it into Ravenclaw! Now, let's see..." Professor Flitwick said, looking back down to the list and regaining his place on it. When he came to Tonks' name, however, a handful of students let out quiet giggles. Tonks grimaced and, as usual, asked if Professor Flitwick wouldn't use her first name. Being the person he was, Flitwick agreed and, in turn, apologized for giving it out in front of everyone.

Harry looked first to Solieyu, then back at Tonks, mouthing 'I like him' to each.

After he finished making sure that all of the students were present and accounted for, Flitwick opened up a very large (in comparison to Flitwick himself, anyway) book and surveyed his class.

"Today," he began, "We will be doing a general overview of this year's class...and, if we get through everything in time, we might just start on a Tickling Charm!"

Professor Flitwick went on to say what the year would bring about - nothing too difficult, yet enough to give them all an adequate challenge. When class was nearly over, the professor checked the time and smiled. "Well! We have six minutes, it seems. Plenty for me to teach you the spell I mentioned earlier! Kindly take your wands out!"

The class did as instructed. Professor Flitwick hopped down from behind his desk, making his way around front. Taking his own wand out, Professor Flitwick looked around and asked for a volunteer. Hands shot up around the class. The professor looked around for a moment before picking a small girl with wire-frame glasses. "Alright,

Ellie. Come and stand next to me. Now... this charm will cause whoever you cast it on to laugh uncontrollably. The incantation is 'Rictusempra' - repeat it with me once, class..."

And, as one, the class recited the incantation with the professor.

"Good, good! Now...this is how it looks in action! Don't worry, Ellie, I'll take it off after just a few seconds. Ready?" Professor Flitwick flicked his wrist quickly and cried, "Rictusempra!" in his squeaky voice. A light shot out of the tip of his wand, hitting the girl named Ellie in the stomach. After a moment, she snorted, then began giggling outright.

After a few seconds of watching the girl laugh herself silly, Flitwick removed the charm with a simple flick of his wand. "You may sit down now, Ellie - thank you for volunteering!" He said, smiling up at the girl.

As Ellie sat back down, Flitwick turned back to address the class. "We'll begin practice on the Tickling Charm tomorrow! If you'd like, you can look up more information about it in your school books!"

And with that, the bell rang, signalling the end of their first Charms class. As everyone got up and began filing out, Harry looked to Solieyu and asked, "Professor Flitwick said he'd call Tonks by her last name... how come you didn't ask him to call you 'Leon'?"

Solieyu ducked his head slightly, a slight smirk on his face. "Well," he said, "it sounds more proper when adults say it... you'd be surprised at how improperly some people say it... Professor Flitwick got it in one..."

"Ahh... you know, I like him." Harry said aloud this time, grinning.

"Me too. Very happy, isn't he?" Tonks piped in, leading the trio back out into the hall.

"He is." Agreed Solieyu with a smile. "I don't think we'll have to worry about this class. It should prove to be very fun..."

The three made their way back up the Charms corridor, Tonks' stomach letting out a low grumble as they did. She blushed and looked away when the boys eyed her.

"Hungry already?" Harry asked. "C'mon, it's only been a few hours since breakfast..."

"My body burns food fast, that's all!" Tonks said, crossing her arms and letting out a 'hmph!' at Harry.

"Well, let's go head to the Great Hall and see if they're serving lunch yet." Harry said, shrugging.

As they reached the main staircase again, they heard rather loud laughter coming from somewhere above them. Looking at one another briefly, the trio decided to go up and take a look at what was so funny.

Climbing up a floor, they were met with a rather unusual sight, to say the least. Two Gryffindor boys - Ron Weasley's brothers, if Harry remembered correctly - were dancing around in red and gold tutus with what appeared to be toilet seats fitted onto their heads. A small crowd of various houses had gathered around the twins, laughing at their antics.

"Fred and George?" Tonks asked Harry, who shrugged and replied, "Must be. Dunno any other redheaded twins in Gryffindor..."

"You don't know much of anyone." Solieyu chimed in.

"Quiet, you." Harry grumbled.

But he grumbled just a bit too loudly and caught the attention of the two boys in question. The twins' eyes lit up and they immediately stopped their dancing routine. Grinning, they sauntered over to Harry's group - something that looked quite bizarre, given what they were wearing at the moment - and grabbed his right hand, shaking it hard in turn.

"Harry Potter!" Said one.

"Wondered when we'd get to meet you!" Said the other.

"Ron's been telling everyone he comes across that you're friends now!" Said the first.

"Load o' rubbish, we think. Couldn't have met more than a day or two ago, at best!" Said the second.

Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu blinked in unison.

"Uh... and... you must be Fred and George..." Harry said, slowly.

"That we are!" Said the second. "I'm Fred. He's George!"

"No, you daft sod, you've got it backwards. I'm George, *you're* Fred!"

"Am not."

"Are so."

"Am not, and I can prove it!" Fred - or...perhaps George - reached down the front of his trousers (the tutus were worn over all of their *other* school clothing) and, with a quick yank, pulled out a pair of red and white boxers shorts with a giant "G" printed on the back. "See! I'M George. You're Fred."

"Ohh. So I am!" Said Fred.

"How did you take those off without taking off your pants?" Tonks asked, looking outright confused.

"I don't *know*!" Said George, pondering his own boxers briefly. "Ah well, those'll go back on in a bit.

"Now, down to ickle Ronniekins..." Fred began, smirking at Harry once more. "Are you his friend, or aren't you?"

Harry shrugged briefly, but Tonks was the one who answered. "He was trailing after us for a good day before we called him on it. He pointed you two out to us in the Great Hall..."

"*Did* he now?" Asked George.

"He said you two were pranksters. And...judging by what we've just seen, can we safely assume he was right?" Harry asked.

"Pranksters, indeed!" Fred said with a grin, bowing deeply.

"Of the highest caliber!" George added, bowing deeper than his twin.

For a moment, Harry's eyes caught Tonks'. All it took was this one moment for them to make their decision. With a nod of Harry's head, Tonks whipped a slip of parchment out from her robes, holding it out to Fred.

"What's this?" Asked Fred, taking it and unfolding it and glancing over it once. "'101 Ways to Pester a Ponce'?"

"Who's the target?" George asked, peering over his brother's shoulder.

"Draco Malfoy." Tonks and Harry replied together.

"Malfoy? Not Lucius Malfoy's son?" Asked George.

"Blonde, bit on the short side, pompous ass?" Asked Fred.

"That's the one." Harry said, making a face.

"Now, aside from it being perfectly justified to begin with, what made you two decide to go after him, eh?" Fred asked, tilting his head.

"He insulted my family and called me ugly when we were getting fitted for our robes... Harry decked him!" Tonks said, grinning proudly at Harry, who blushed.

"Ooh, wish we could've seen *that*." Said George, grinning at Fred, who grinned back and nodded solemnly.

"We thought..." Tonks began, biting her lip for a moment. "...Well, we thought that, as pranksters, you two might be able to help us think of some ways to get him."

"You came to the right people, m'lady!" Fred said, giving Tonks a perfectly silly bow, gesturing wildly with his arm as he went.

"If we could borrow this for a night or three, I'm sure we could provide a *few* suggestions worthy of such a list!" George added.

"Have at it, then." Harry said, smiling at the twins.

Just then, Tonks' stomach let out another growl.

"I believe..." Solieyu, who had remained quiet for the whole of the conversation, began, "that your stomach was expecting to be filled when we were distracted."

Tonks made a face, looking down at herself. "Oi, you!" She said, addressing her stomach. "Stop that! I'm goin', I'm goin'!"

"Before you do..." George said. "Mind if we get the rest of your names? I mean, we know about Harry, of course..."

"Ah, right. Name's Tonks." Tonks said.

"Just 'Tonks'?" Asked Fred.

Tonks scowled. "My first name is... Nymphadora." She said, making a face as she said it. "But call me that and I'll turn your pink bits blue!"

Fred and George winced. "Right you are." Said the former, turning to look at Solieyu. "Annnnd you might be?"

"Solieyu Reinhardt. Call me Leon." Replied the boy in question, nodding his head as he looked to each of the twins.

"Impressive name." Said Fred. "Well, we'll let you three head off to lunch, then! We'll bring your list back in a few days."

"Alright." Harry said. "Seeya around, then!"

"Bye!" Replied the twins.

Turning around, the three headed back down the staircase. A few floors down, Harry grinned. "Ron might be a bit dodgy, but those two..."

"Are certifiable." Finished Solieyu, rolling his eyes. "I wonder where they grabbed those toilet seats from..."

"I don't think we want to know." Said Tonks. "But anyone who'd wanna do something to Malfoy's alright in MY book."

"I take it this Draco Malfoy is a bit of a rival for you both?" Solieyu asked, slipping a hand into his pocket.

"A bit'? We met the terrific ponce in Madam Malkin's. He was goin' on an' on about how he thought this or he thought that, makin' himself seem like he was a big shot. I called him on bein' a pampered git that liked hearin' himself talk an' he started flinging insults at me!" Tonks said, darkly. "Insulted my hair an' everything." She added huffily.

"And then Harry hit him?"

"Harry knocked him on his butt, right there!" Tonks said. "The look on the prat's face was absolutely brilliant!"

"One of my finer memories." Harry admitted, smiling faintly at the memory. "He deserved it."

"So...you two made a list?" Solieyu went on.

"Yup! Stuff to do to him. It's already really long... what'd we leave off at, Harry?"

"Uh...somewhere around 90, after editing it down a bit." Harry said, taking a moment to think.

"90... and what, might I ask, are some of these ideas?"

Harry and Tonks grinned at Solieyu, each suddenly throwing an arm around his shoulders. "Leon, m'friend," Tonks began, "don't say that you didn't ask!"

And with that, the great explanation of The List's ideas began.

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"Stomach feeling better?" Asked Harry as the three left the Great Hall a good half hour later.

"Mmm, MUCH!" Replied the girl, patting her stomach.

"A full Tonks is a happy Tonks?" Solieyu pondered aloud.

"Yeah...but don't say it like that, sounds all wonky." Tonks said.
"So...whatcha think of our ideas?"

"I think you're both loony." Solieyu said, grinning a bit. "But I have to admit being intrigued by some of them. I mean...it isn't every day you hear of a plan to turn someone's -- what did you call them?"

"Pink bits."

"Yes, thank you -- someone's pink bits black with the words 'Daddy's Boy' on them. Not a nice mental image, either, I must say."

"Yeah, you didn't eat very much." Harry said, looking over at Solieyu as the three headed out the large front doors in the Entrance Hall.
"Sorry about that."

"It's okay." Solieyu said, waving a hand dismissively. "I never eat very much, anyway. My body... well, I suppose it's a bit the opposite of Tonks'... processes food very slowly, so a little goes a long way."

"Ahh, I see. So the talk of lodging large, cumbersome object's up the ponce's--"

"No, no... I wasn't put off by that. A bit confused as to how the physics of it would *work*, perhaps, but not nauseated." Solieyu said, cutting Tonks off.

"Right...Sprout's next, right?" Harry asked, looking over the school grounds quickly.

"Yup! Greenhouse Five." Tonks said.

Solieyu sighed at this. When asked, he explained that he had never been very good with plants, having killed a flower garden when he was asked to tend to it by a neighbor when he was seven. He then went on to mention that he was almost a bad luck charm around plants of any sort. Of course, Harry refused to believe this until he saw it for himself, but he kept this to himself.

Professor Sprout, as it turned out, was a squat little witch with frizzy gray hair and a patched hat. The first thought that the trio had had

upon entering Greenhouse Five, however, had been just how awful it smelled.

As it turned out, the smell came from Professor Sprout's favored brand of fertilizer, which consisted partly of dragon dung. Trying to ignore the smell and concentrate on what was being taught, however, none of them said anything.

"Everybody here? Yes? Alright... I'm Professor Sprout - welcome to Herbology. As you can see, we'll be dealing with various magical plants...none too dangerous for you lot, though. Those are kept over in Greenhouse One and you won't be going there until fifth year, at least." Said the professor.

"Let's get right down to business, shall we? I've got some Snarling Snidegrass that's overdue for some pruning. You all should have some pruning shears in front of you, yes? Come up and get a pot of Snidegrass and begin working. What you're to do is to snip off any excess limbs and leaves. The main vine is not to be cut. And for heaven's sake, don't cut off the heads!" Professor Sprout said, motioning for her students to come up and get what seemed to be an overgrown weed.

Harry's seemed almost entranced with him. It purred instead of growling, it twisted and turned so he could easily see any spots that needed trimming, and it curled up and seemingly fell asleep once he was done.

Tonks', on the other hand, hated her with a passion. It had lashed out with an overly-long branch of sorts, smacking her in the cheek and leaving a pinkish mark. Harry and Solieyu had to physically restrain her after that to keep her from decapitating the plant.

Solieyu, as it turned out, didn't seem to be lying. Not only did his chunk of Snidegrass loathe him as much as Tonks' did her, it seemed to move at just the wrong moment, causing the boy to make inaccurate cuts. By the time he was done, the plant looked as if it had survived a war, there were so many cuts and nicks all over its main vine.

"At least it's still alive." Tonks said, patting Solieyu on the back.

"Just barely. I suppose it could have been worse... it *could* have withered up and died when I touched it." Solieyu said with a sigh.

Tonks offered the pale boy a pat on the back while Harry tried to get his plant to stop nuzzling against one of his wrists.

After the class had let out, the group headed back for the school, discussing what they would spend the rest of the day doing. Harry was hoping to go through more of his school books - after all, this was still new in his mind. Tonks wanted to kick back and nap away the remainder of the afternoon. And Solieyu...

"Do either of you know what the time is right now?" He asked as they pushed through the front doors of the school.

"Should be around 4:30, why?" Tonks asked.

"Ahh, that would explain it. I'll catch up to you two later, alright? I just remembered that I promised a friend that I'd meet up with him outside of the library to help with a Potions essay..." Solieyu said.

"Ah, alright. Have...uh... fun, then." Harry offered, feebly.

Solieyu chuckled and headed for the main staircase, waving a hand back over his shoulder as he did. "I'm sure I will."

"Friend of yours?" Came a voice from behind the duo, making them jump.

Turning, they saw one Ron Weasley standing a few feet behind them, watching as Solieyu casually made his way upstairs.

"Yeah. Met him after our first Defense class... though Harry shoulda known him a bit sooner, given that they share a dorm an' all." Tonks said, shooting Harry an amused look. Harry stuck out his tongue.

"Ahh... So, you two done with classes for today, too?" Ron asked.

"Yup." Said Harry.

"Great! Wanna go down by the lake and watch my brothers? Got told by Katie Bell that they're gonna make a pair of toilet seats dive bomb the giant squid... ...where they'd get the toilet seats is beyond me, though..." Ron said, frowning in thought.

"Actually," Tonks said, "We need t'go study. Professor Flitwick gave us a bit o' homework tonight - guess he wanted to see how brainy Harry is or somethin'..."

"Oh..." Ron said, sounding slightly dejected. Recovering quickly, however, he smiled and turned back around. "Well, if you get finished early or something, come on out, alright?"

"Sure!" Tonks said, sounding a bit too pleasant for Harry's tastes.

After Ron was out of earshot, he turned to her and asked, "Now what was that all about?"

"What?"

"We don't have any homework, Tonks!"

"I know that! But c'mon, did you *really* want to spend the rest of the day hanging out with him? Fred and George seem okay, but Ron... well, Ron gives me bad vibes."

"Bad vibes'?" Harry repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah... probably left over from when he was, y'know, *stalking* you."

"He wasn't stalking me, he was... just nervous or something." Harry argued, scowling.

"Sure," Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "He's one of *them*."

"One of what?"

"Your fans! The really weird ones. He's probably got a poster of you already...wouldn't surprise me if someone had snapped your photo without any of us knowing the day we went to Diagon Alley." Tonks

explained as she tugged Harry in the direction Ravenclaw Tower was in.

"You're mental - he seems alright enough!" Harry said, crossing his arms. "Besides, Dean would've said something if he was a nutter, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe... but I still don't like him." Tonks said with a shrug.

"Uh-oh... and speaking of unlikable people..." Harry said, nudging Tonks with his shoulder and pointing down the corridor they were in. "Look at who's coming."

"Oh, lovely." Said Tonks, blandly.

Draco Malfoy, being flanked by his goon brigade, was making his way up the hallway from the other end. Crabbe and Goyle were shoving smaller kids (and some bigger ones) out of their path as they went. With a groan, Harry looked back over his shoulder, then at Tonks and said, "Too far back for us to get away. Looks like we're gonna have to go through."

"Mm." Tonks grunted.

Walking in a strangely wooden fashion, Harry and Tonks continued up one side of the corridor as the Slytherins pushed and shoved their way down the other. For a moment after the two groups had passed one another, Harry thought that Malfoy hadn't noticed them. But then, not a moment later came a sneering, drawling voice from behind.

"Well, imagine seeing you here, Potter. You and your ugly little girlfriend prancing around on a date?" Draco said, smirking.

Not bothering to turn around, Tonks growled, "Remember what happened to you the *last* time you insulted me, Malfoy. I believe y'winded up flat on your arse, gaping like a fish."

Draco twitched, then snarled, "Keep your mouth shut or--!"

"Or what?" Harry finally said, turning slightly. "You'll send your ...what are those, bodyguards... after us? In a crowded hallway? Near a

class that's just getting out? Yes, that *would* be amusing, Malfoy. In fact, feel free to do it. I'd love seeing you getting a detention with Filch."

Opening his mouth, then snapping it shut a moment later, Draco sneered at Harry, then hit Crabbe and Goyle in their arms. "Come on! We'll wait until later. You'd better keep your eyes open, Potter, because you never know when I'll show up behind you."

"And I would be afraid of you *why*, Malfoy?" Harry asked. "You couldn't take a punch even when I was half-malnourished. What makes you think you could take one now? And besides, if you ever bothered dirtying your fingernails trying to hit me, I'd be amazed. Shouldn't you have said something about never knowing when Crabbe and Goyle would show up behind me?"

A group of Gryffindors started snickering from somewhere behind Harry and Tonks. The twitch in Draco's eye deepened. "You just watch your back, Potter. And your girlfriend's."

"She'd do worse than I would." Said Harry, smirking faintly as he glanced over at Tonks.

Draco narrowed his eyes, then turned and stormed off down the corridor, Crabbe and Goyle rushing to catch up with him as fast as their pudgy legs could carry them.

"Now *that* was impressive!" Said a familiar voice.

"Put him in his place!" Came another.

Blinking, Harry and Tonks looked over their shoulders to see that, amongst others, Fred and George Weasley had been watching the verbal argument unfold.

"Hi again." Said Tonks. "...Shouldn't you be out by the lake right now?"

"Dive bombing the squid?" Harry added.

"Ran into Ron, did you?" Fred asked, grinning. "Yeah, he's gonna be waiting down there for awhile, I'm afraid."

"He kept pestering us about you, so we figured we'd try getting him out of our hair for a bit." Said George. "Seems right taken with you, Harry, lad."

"Won't shut up." Added Fred with a nod.

"Toldja he was weird." Tonks said.

"Ahh, right... anyway, have you two had time to look over The List yet?" Harry asked the twins.

"Ah, yes... about that! We were wanting to ask you something very important." Said Fred. "George and I... well, we were hoping you'd pass it on to us for good."

"Eh? Why?" Tonks asked, tilting her head.

"Well, no offense to you two - you've got some brilliant ideas written down. The trouble *is*, you're both first years. Us, we've been here longer and know more spells. Plus, we've got a few inventions that we're working on that could help pull off some of the more intricate stuff." Fred explained, gesturing with one hand.

"We thought we'd take it off of your hands and, say, cross off one listed thing per week. We've done things to people and we've never gotten caught before." George said. "In fact, we once turned Filch's hair into a rainbow-colored afro for an entire week. Took Flitwick a good while to figure out how to counter it."

"Sooo... what do you say? This way, you won't have to worry about being caught, *you* get to see the big prat get pranked, and *we* get to have a little fun of our own." Fred said, steepling his fingers together in front of himself.

Harry and Tonks looked at one another. For awhile, neither said a word. Slowly, however, both began to smile. Shortly after, full-on grins replaced the smiles.

With a melodramatic bow, Tonks said, "We'd be honored for the two utmost experts on pranks and jokes to take control of The List."

"Brilliant!" Said George. "We've already got our first picked out. Be sure to show up to breakfast on Sunday a bit early."

"Which one?" Harry asked. But Fred held up a finger and smiled.

"We aren't telling." He said.

"It'd ruin the surprise." Said George.

"Aww, that's no fun. Oh well, we'll show up when we should. Hope you two have fun with it." Harry said. "Though... if you would, jot down whatever you come up with. I wouldn't mind getting the original back at the end of the year... to work on over summer and stuff..."

"Not a problem! We'll use a copying spell and give the extended List back as good as new." George said. "Now, if you'll excuse us... we need to get on the move before ickle Ronniekins comes hunting for us."

The twins headed off in the same direction that Malfoy had made his exit in after that and, slowly, the crowd that had gathered began to disperse. Harry and Tonks continued on their way back towards Ravenclaw Tower.

"The List is in good hands." Harry said, laughing.

"I wonder which one they're going to do..." Tonks thought aloud. "I wouldn't say no to seeing them start with one of the more difficult tricks..."

"This weekend's going to be busy." Harry said. "Any homework we might have, the Metamorphmagus training, trying to keep that git Terry from leaving on his odyssey of death, and then getting up early on Sunday to see what the twins have planned."

"Yeah... maybe we should ask ol' Walt to keep them from leaving." Tonks suggested.

"Think he would?"

"It's possible. I dunno, maybe we should just let the two idiots go off and get themselves detention. I'm glad that at least three of you guys had the brains to decline." Tonks said, playfully rapping Harry on the side of the head.

Swatting at her hand, Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't mind exploring late at night, but... if Dumbledore says there's something dangerous on the third floor, we should trust him, right?"

"Right. He may be a bit insane, but he's still the most powerful wizard in the whole of Europe..."

"We tried warning Terry that it was a dumb idea." Harry said. "But he's got it in his head to be a great adventurer or something. Wonder why he got sorted into Ravenclaw...aren't we supposed to be more brains than heart or something?"

"Something like that." Tonks said. "Hey, Walt, how's your day been?" She added as the two approached the portrait of Walter the Wise.

"Ahh, Miss Tonks, Mister Potter! My day has been quite relaxing, thank you." Said the old wizard with a smile. "I found the copy of Dark Creatures and How to Outsmart Them earlier! It's been missing for at least half a decade now..."

"Gonna spend the day goin' through it?" Tonks asked.

"I certainly am. Password?"

"Lucidus Susceptor." Said Harry.

"Indeed. Have a good evening." Said Walter.

Harry and Tonks headed in through the arched pathway into the common room. As they did, Tonks turned to Harry and grinned. "I noticee that you didn't say anything when Malfoy was calling me your girlfriend, Harry. Care to explain?"

"Uhh... well, I mean..."

Walter's portrait closed behind them, the old wizard in it chuckling merrily as he listened to the two talking. "Ahh, to be young again."

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Author's Notes: Eep! Someone got Solieyu's name. o.o Technically, all three of his names (First, last, and nickname) are Castlevania chara names. As for where 'Leon' came from... well, with me working his pronunciation as 'soh-LAY-you' and all...and with a Castlevania chara having a name pronounced 'LAY-on'...well... it all kinda fit together.

And I'm pleased to see people are starting to wonder if there's something more to Leon... I won't say whether anyone's correct or not...and I'm sure all of you will be able to work out what he is, if anything, by the time I'm ready to state in-story. And, since I felt kinda weird switching so often last chapter, Leon's gonna be referred to by his proper name in all instances when he's not being spoken to by someone. So no more "Leon yawned, leaning back"stuff...

As for Andromeda mentioning Narcissa - it simply slipped my mind. But I can't feel that those two are on good terms, anyway, all things considered...

Chapter 12 – A Star is Born

They hadn't been lying - History of Magic WAS the most boring class that they had been to. Harry looked around the room slowly as the school's only ghost teacher droned on. Most of the students were staring off into space or sleeping. Professor Binns didn't seem to notice, however, as he simply stared at a point in the back of the room and continued speaking about Goblin rebellions or somesuch.

Solieyu seemed to be one of the few people left awake. Not only awake, but taking notes, to boot. Deciding to ask his friend WHY he was bothering after class had ended, Harry continued his look-about. Terry Boot, on the other side of the room, was whispering animatedly to Gary Haskit. Probably about their ridiculous journey to the center of the school that they had been plotting.

And Tonks...

Tonks was beside Harry, fast asleep. Her currently-long, red hair was falling about her face in a way that made her look anything but the energetic prank-planning girl that she was. Harry couldn't help but smile at her for a moment. The weekend was drawing ever closer and with it, his first lesson at trying to change his features around. With any luck - and Harry's had been pretty good as of late, fame and fangirls aside.

That morning, during breakfast, Tonks had tried to pry more information out of Fred and George Weasley about which prank from The List that they were planning on doing. But it had been to no avail. The redheads were keeping their lips firmly sealed on the subject. As she and Harry had left the Great Hall, she had to scowl at the twins' younger brother, who had started to trail after them.

They had met up with Solieyu on their way to the History of Magic classroom. When asked why he hadn't been at breakfast, Solieyu had said that he hadn't felt well that morning and had gone to see Madam Pomfrey. Indeed, Harry had remembered seeing one empty bed when he had gotten up. Solieyu stated that he was feeling much better now that he was out of the hospital wing. He looked it, too. There was a bit more color in his usually pale face.

And so they had entered the History of Magic classroom as an awake and alert trio.

Now one was asleep, one was still awake and alert, and one - Harry - was in-between the other two - not quite fully awake and yet not feeling the pulls of the sandman, inviting him into slumberland.

He jumped, therefore, when the bell went off, signalling the end of the class. Professor Binns abruptly stopped speaking, probably in the middle of a sentence, and floated off through the blackboard that was behind him.

The students who were still awake began waking up those that had fallen asleep. Harry gave Tonks a soft shake, calling her name. It took awhile, as Tonks usually was a deep sleeper, but he got her to open her eyes. "S'about time." He said once this happened. "I've been trying to wake you up for a bit. Class is over. S'almost lunch time!"

"Nn...food...hungee Tonks." Said Tonks in a very groggy voice. She tried laying her head back on the table in front of her, but Harry refused to let her.

After nearly a minute more of prodding and shaking, Tonks was awake enough to stand and walk, though she wasn't very happy.

"You interrupted a perfectly nice dream!" She said with a hmph.

"What were you dreaming about?" Harry asked as he gathered his books.

"Never you mind." Said Tonks, turning away.

Harry blinked, but shrugged it off and looked toward Solieyu, who had been patiently waiting for his friends to get themselves up and out of class. "So what'd you find so interesting, anyway? You looked almost like you were enjoying yourself."

Solieyu coughed, a small smile on his face. "Well," he began, "Someone has to stay awake and take notes, right? It wouldn't do if everyone in class slept and no one took notes - we'd all fail. And

besides, the potion that Madam Pomfrey gave me gives me more energy than I'm used to. I figured that it couldn't hurt if I was the one taking notes this time."

"And we all thank you for it, I'm sure." Harry said, grinning as the trio headed out of the classroom. "You good an' awake now, Tonks? I don't want you running into walls or falling down any stairs."

"M'awake enough." Grumbled the girl, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, which were a pale green at the moment.

"If you say so." Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "Come on, food's waiting for us."

"Foood..." Tonks said, smiling sleepily.

"Always works." Harry stage-whispered aside to Solieyu. He got a swat on the arm from Tonks for his efforts.

Entering the Great Hall, the trio headed for their usual spots at the end of the Ravenclaw Table. But the three had barely gotten their plates and goblets in order before a high-pitched scream emanated from somewhere in the direction of the Entrance Hall. A few seconds later,

Fred and George came rushing into the room, laughing themselves silly. One spotted Harry's group, tugging the other over.

"I'm just guessing, but am I to assume that you two were behind that scream just now?" Solieyu asked, eyebrow raised.

At this, the twins both snorted and doubled over in laughter again. They weren't able to breathe properly enough to explain what had happened when it all became clear.

Draco Malfoy, his hair spiked up in a brilliant, rainbow-colored mohawk, stormed in. His face was a purple to rival Vernon Dursley's, and his robes were just as rainbow-colored as his hair. To say that he walked would have been misleading. Rather, he was waddling, as the giant, red clown shoes on his feet didn't take very well to normal walking.

The Great Hall burst into laughter when the students caught sight of the Slytherin. Fred and George collapsed to the ground in giggles.

"Number Forty-Eight!" Tonks exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I thought you weren't going to do the first prank until this weekend, though!"

"We...we couldn't help it!" Wheezed George between laughs. "We...we came downstairs and...and he and Ron were arguing with each other!" Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Hated each other ever since Diagon Alley. Met up in Flourish and Blotts. Malfoy was having kittens over something, too. Hey, I bet it was 'cause he just got knocked on his arse, now that I think about it! ...Anyway, he and Ron got into a fight there... and you know Malfoy, sniping whenever he can..."

"Family's not exactly wealthy." Fred chimed in. "And Malfoy knows it. So now, Ron and Malfoy start in whenever they cross paths..."

"We overheard him talking about our mother this time." George continued with a tsk and a shake of his head. "Annnnd we 'slipped,' that's all."

"No need to make excuses to us." Harry said, biting at his lip to try and keep from cracking up, as well. Malfoy had waddled himself over to the Slytherin table to try and find an older student who could change him back to normal. It was very amusing to see the cross of a punk rocker and a clown yelling at someone. Especially when that someone had a soft, drawling voice.

Tonks, who had no problems with giggling herself stupid, was doing just that. "You two... you two are brilliant!" She gasped out.

"Yes, we think so." Fred said, smiling proudly.

"And we're still planning another for this weekend. We'll just need to pick out another one, that's all. Shouldn't take but a minute!" Exclaimed George, jabbing the air with a finger.

"Ahh, you guys are a great antidote to the boredom of History of Magic, you know that?" Harry said, still trying not to dissolve into laughter.

"Having Binns first thing in the morning. Shouldn't be allowed!" George said.

"You two aren't worried about getting into trouble?" Asked Solieyu, who had kept his composure (though he was grinning) through the whole event.

"Nawww." George said. "We've done loads worse than this. The staff's used to it! In fact, we haven't done much of anything so far this year. Probably had some of 'em worried."

"Shame that Snape's not around. I'd love seein' the look on that greasy-haired git's face." Fred added.

"You realize how many points you'd lose your house, though." Solieyu said. "Right?"

"Of course... but we always make 'em back, eventually." Fred said. "We keep track of how many we lose, see. Then we break even before the end of the year."

"Even got a handful more, last year." George added.

At that moment, another Gryffindor came bursting into the Great Hall, looking quite out of breath. He scanned the crowd for a moment, found who he was looking for, and ran over to the twins. "Get movin'! Snape's on his way and he's mad! Someone went back to tell him!"

Fred and George nodded, saluted Harry and Tonks, then turned and dashed off, hollering a "Thanks, Lee!" over their shoulders as they left.

Lee, meanwhile, looked to the trio, raised an eyebrow, and asked, "So you guys are who they got that list from?"

"Yup!" Said Tonks.

"None other." Said Harry.

Lee rolled his eyes. "I'll know who to blame, then, if we lose the House Cup this year. Damn, there's Snape! Seeya!"

And with that, Lee walked as calmly and innocently as he could back to the Gryffindor table, taking a seat beside a girl with very bushy hair.

Snape, meanwhile, was looking towards his house's table with a mixture of horror, outrage, and shock on his face. Muttering something under his breath, the potions master stalked over toward Draco Malfoy. Draco had just tried pulling out his wand to hex Goyle, who had stepped on his foot, but only succeeded in whipping out a giant, squeaky mallet. He looked completely baffled when it was all the way out. So baffled, in fact, that he didn't notice Snape standing directly behind him until he pulled the mallet back, still wanting to hit Goyle for what he had done...

...And bashed his head of house square in the face. The mallet let out a happy "*WHISH!*" of air when it came in contact with Snape. Draco, not expecting something to stop his arm, turned around to yell at whoever was stupid enough to get so close to him...and stopped dead, gaping up at Snape, who looked just short of being outright livid. Snape grabbed his own wand quickly, aimed it at various parts of Draco, and turned his hair, outfit, and wand back to normal. He then grabbed the boy by the wrist and proceeded to drag him out of the Great Hall.

Draco protested and apologized the entire way.

Once gone, the Great Hall erupted into laughter once more. Tonks was pounding the table with one hand and clutching her aching stomach with the other, she was laughing so hard. And this time, Harry was inclined to join her.

"Oh, god, my stomach hurts..." Harry said as the trio left the Great Hall half an hour later.

"Mine too! Ohh, and I'm still hungry..." Tonks said, walking beside Harry and rubbing her stomach.

"That's because you spent too much time laughing and not enough eating." Solieyu said in a would-be sage voice.

"It was worth it." Harry said, grinning. "I was hoping they'd do Number Forty-Eight..."

"And when Malfoy squashed Snape in the face with the mallet... that was absolutely priceless!" Tonks said, grinning as well. "Ohh, the morning may've been boring, but lunch sure wasn't. How'd you keep from laughing, anyway, Leon? That was the funniest thing I've ever laid eyes on!"

"Just wondering how the Weasley twins were planning to top something like that, that's all." Responded Solieyu. "And besides, if I had laughed as hard as you two, I wouldn't have eaten much, either."

"You never eat much." Tonks said.

"I never need much." Solieyu replied.

"Alright, you two." Harry said. "Cut it o-- hey, look! There's Malfoy!"

Harry pointed off down a corridor (they were returning to Ravenclaw Tower to drop off their other books and supplies) at one Draco Malfoy, who looked right miffed. The blonde had his hands in his pockets and was muttering fiercely to himself as he walked, his eyes on the ground.

"Oi, Malfoy! Nice shot with that mallet!" Tonks called out. "Remind me not to be around you when you're feeling like pulling another out!"

Draco looked up sharply. His eyes immediately narrowed as they fell on Tonks, who was smiling cheerfully back at him. As he passed the group by, the blonde turned his head and hissed, "I'll get you back for that, Potter. I know it was you... it *had* to be you..."

"Oh?" Harry began, raising his eyebrows. "And why's that?"

Draco opened his mouth...closed it...opened it again...then growled something foul and stormed away, hands clenching tight as he did so.

"The best part is his lack of proof." Harry said with a smile once Draco was out of range. "And the twins would hopefully never carry

The List around with them, so...everyone would just put it off as another one of their pranks."

"We've gotta get them something special at Christmas." Tonks said as they started walking again.

"Perhaps," Solieyu suggested, "A pair of rainbow-colored wigs?"

Harry and Tonks gaped at their friend, who raised his eyebrows and asked, "What? I can't say something amusing once in awhile?"

"And just for that, I'm adding your name to the 'from' part of the tag." Tonks said, grinning at Solieyu.

"Wonder if they even make rainbow-colored mohawk wigs..." Harry pondered aloud.

"Ah, sure they do. If they don't, you can just get 'em transfigured!" Tonks said.

"You two *do* realize that if you get them wigs, they'll try wearing them around the school for awhile, right?" Solieyu asked.

"I'm counting on it." Said Tonks.

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The next class on the schedule for the first-year Ravenclaws was Flying with Madam Hooch. Harry was looking forward to this class much more than he had been with History of Magic. As he, Tonks, and Solieyu made their way back from Ravenclaw Tower, students were laughing with each other and talking about the prank that the Weasley twins had played at lunch. Harry exchanged a small smile with Tonks.

Their lesson seemed to take place not far out onto the school grounds. Several of the school's brooms had been lined up in rows along the ground. Madam Hooch, a woman with short, gray hair and strangely-yellow eyes, was waiting for all of her students to arrive. Harry's group seemed to be one of the first to arrive. Off near the

professor were a pair of Slytherins. Elsewhere, a lone Hufflepuff was looking around as if waiting for friends to arrive.

"This is only the one lesson, isn't it?" Asked Harry as he looked at all of the brooms.

"Yup!" Said Tonks. "Guess she's gonna do all the first years at once. Quicker that way, I suppose..."

And indeed, this seemed to be the case. As the time of the class drew nearer, more and more students from all four houses began filing out onto the grounds. Once everyone was present and accounted for, Madam Hooch cleared her throat, drawing all eyes to her.

"Well, what are you all waiting for? Everyone stand by a broomstick." She called out. "Come on, hurry up! Stick your right hand out over your broom and say 'Up!'"

Harry waited a moment before testing this out, choosing to observe a few of the other students trying to get their brooms to obey.

As everyone seemed to shout out 'Up!' at once, a number of things happened. Ron Wesley got smashed in the face by his broomstick, which seemed to be overly eager. The boy Harry had seen on the Hogwarts Express - Neville Longbottom - seemed to have only a little better luck. His broom didn't hit him in the face, but it didn't seem to want to come all the way up, either.

Malfoy, on the other hand, seemed to have very little trouble in getting his broom to obey - something that annoyed Harry to no end.

Beside him, Tonks got her broomstick up after a few quick tries. On his other side, Solieyu's was gliding in the air a few feet above the ground. Like the boy who would be riding it, the broomstick seemed to be very calm and relaxed.

Finally looking down at his own broom, Harry finally cried, "Up!" The broom jumped into his hand at once, causing him to let out a relieved sigh.

After a bit more practice, most everyone in the class was able to get their brooms off of the ground. Though some were just barely making it.

Madam Hooch proceeded to tell the students how to mount their brooms. As she walked around, helping her class properly grip their brooms, Harry and Tonks shared a quiet chuckle - Madam Hooch had just told Draco Malfoy, who had come to class gloating about how long he'd been riding a broom, that his grip was completely wrong.

"Now then," Said Madam Hooch, walking back to where everyone could see her. "When I blow my whistle, I want you to kick off from the ground. Keep your brooms good and steady, rise up a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. Ready?"

But as soon as the whistle had been blown, Neville, who had been jumpy around his broom, pushed off entirely too hard. While most other students in the class were hovering a foot or two off of the ground, Neville was screaming straight up, higher and higher every moment.

"Come back, boy!" Shouted the professor, craning her head back to keep an eye on the Gryffindor. But Neville continued to rise for a bit longer. Neville's broomstick then seemed to go into a fit of sorts, sputtering and darting about erratically. With a sudden, hard twist, Neville had been flung off. Harry could only stare on, mouth open, as he saw the boy come falling back to earth. The noise from the impact made almost everyone in class wince.

Madam Hooch rushed over to Neville's side, along with a number of Gryffindor students, who had landed almost immediately after Neville had shot upward. From his point of view, Harry couldn't tell who had the whiter face - the professor, Neville, or the other Gryffindors. He saw that Madam Hooch had said something, though he was too far away to make out what, exactly. But a moment later, she had Neville on his feet. The boy was clutching one of his wrists and groaning pitifully.

"None of you are to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing!" She called to the class as she escorted Neville back toward the

school."You leave those brooms right where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch!'"

"Poor Neville..." Said Harry, shaking his head. "Always seems to be something or another with him..."

"Yeah, he's accident prone if ever somebody was..." Tonks said.

Harry was about to say something else when a familiar, annoying laugh filled the silence. Rolling his eyes and suppressing a groan of annoyance, Harry turned to see Malfoy laughing himself silly, smirking all the while.

"And he's in Gryffindor? The hat must have been sick." Said the blonde. "Did you see his face? Crying like a little baby..."

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Snapped one of the Gryffindor girls in attendance.

One of the Slytherin girls next to Draco shot back something snide to the Gryffindor girl, causing them both to drift away from the rest of the class in a verbal sparring match.

"Look!" Came Malfoy's voice again. "Now what have we here?"

Harry turned back to look at Malfoy, seeing him reach down and pick up a roundish object off of the ground. Draco seemed to eye it carefully for a moment before barking another laugh out. "A Remembrall! For *him*? What's the point? The fat little crybaby wouldn't remember what the thing was reminding him of, anyway!"

Harry exchanged a look with Tonks, who nodded. He glanced over at Solieyu, who nodded as well. It didn't matter to Harry that Neville wasn't in the same house as he was. It didn't matter that he hardly knew the boy at all. He wasn't going to stand idly by as Malfoy ran his mouth, throwing insults around like he owned the place.

Moving down a few brooms, still holding his own, Harry began, "You know, Malfoy, for someone who came into the Great Hall this morning looking like an escapee from a circus, you sure are acting tough. Or...did you forget how it felt to be laughed at? If you need to be reminded, it wouldn't take much..."

Everyone fell quiet, including the two bickering girls. Their eyes glanced from Harry to Malfoy, who was sneering and, if only faintly, blushing somewhat.

"Ahh, I wondered how long it would take for you to butt in." Malfoy said in his slow, drawling voice. "Sticking up for the great lump, are you?"

Harry's eyes glancing quickly to the group of Gryffindors still around and meeting Dean Thomas' gaze briefly, he nodded. "That's right. Got a problem with it, do you?"

"Oh, no..." Draco said, smirking. "Not at all..."

"Give it here, Malfoy." Harry said calmly, holding out his left hand and nodding towards the Remembrall still clutched tightly by the blonde.

Malfoy looked Harry over for a moment before chuckling and shaking his head. "Now why, Potter, would I want to do that? No... I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find. How about... up a tree?"

"I won't say it again, Malfoy." Harry said, narrowing his eyes.

But Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and had taken off. Harry felt a surge of annoyance course through him. Whatever he had been bragging about beforehand, it didn't seem to be all waffle - the boy knew how to fly. Hovering around the top of one of the grounds' numerous trees, Malfoy called out, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry scowled, rubbing at his temples for a moment before turning and looking back at Tonks and Solieyu. "Suggestions?" He asked.

"I say ya go get the prat." Tonks said, nodding.

"You could always try keeping him up there until after Madam Hooch returned. He'd get in trouble for being off the ground." Solieyu supplied with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "If you can't wait, however..."

Feeling the need to do *something* to stop Malfoy's arrogant laughter as he soared above, Harry looked down at his own broom. "Well, now,

do you feel up to a chase?" He asked it, feeling somewhat silly about it. Surprisingly, however, the broom seemed to rattle in his hand somewhat.

"So, that's three votes for getting the ponce, is it?" Harry said under his breath as he mounted the broom.

"Harry, wait!" Came a voice from one side. Turning to look, Harry saw Dean Thomas rushing over.

"Harry, you don't have to do this..." He began, looking up at Draco.

"Yeah, I know. Only I have this thing about bullies, see..." Harry said, scowling as he moved his gaze upward again. "Hits me in a bad spot, you could say."

"Yeah, but still..."

"Look, I'll do what I can... but do me a favor. If you spot Madam Hooch coming back, yell or something, alright?"

"Yeah, sure..." Dean said, frowning slightly. "Be careful. We overheard the git talking and he claims to've been flying for a long time... we thought it was a load of rubbish, but..."

"But it looks like he knows what he's doing. Yeah, I noticed." Harry said, shaking his head and kicking off.

The broom responded wonderfully, sending him soaring up into the sky. A bit too far up, in fact. He had to tilt the front of the broom downward in order to get level with Malfoy, who was looking somewhat surprised.

"Give it here, Malfoy." Harry said again as he approached.

But Draco just snickered, tossing the Remembrall back and forth between his hands lazily. "Or what? You'll knock me off of this broom?"

"If I must." Harry replied.

"I'd like to see you--**AUGH!**" Draco began, not expecting Harry to suddenly lean forward and shoot right at him. Malfoy grabbed his broom and jerked it to one side just in time for Harry to soar past. Making a fluid turn, Harry tried again from another angle. Once more, Malfoy had to yank on his broom to get out of the way of the Ravenclaw boy. As they were performing this act of hit or miss, they had been steadily getting higher into the air.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here to come to your rescue, Malfoy." Harry said with a small grin as he circled around the blonde. "It's a long way down, don't you think?"

Malfoy looked down briefly, his eyes bulging only for a moment. But it was enough to make him realize what he was doing. Looking back up at Harry, the blonde suddenly growled, "Yes, it is...certainly long enough to break *this* thing. Now be a good hero and catch it if you can!"

Shouting the last word, Draco gave the Remembrall a solid throw, slinging it high up into the air. Harry watched the orb fly upwards for a moment, then looked back to where Malfoy was... or, rather, where he had *been*. The Slytherin was now flying back down toward the ground. With another scowl, Harry locked his gaze onto the Remembrall and began to shoot upward.

Luck, as it seemed to be in most cases, just wasn't with him on this particular afternoon. The Remembrall had been thrown out more than it had been thrown up. So when Harry got up to where it should have been, it had begun its descent - right for the side of the castle. Muttering something under his breath about being forced to do something like this in front of the whole of the first years, Harry pointed the top of the broom for where he figured the orb would collide. The broom responded instantly, shooting him back down at an angle.

Caught in a dive that he wasn't at all thrilled to be in, Harry gripped the broom tightly in his right hand. As he approached the Remembrall, which was approaching Hogwarts, he extended his left hand out and leaned forward even more. The castle was rapidly approaching, but Harry was almost caught up to the Remembrall. Crying silently for

just one last burst of speed from the broom, he leaned as far forward as he dared. His fingers gripped around the orb and, at the same time, he jerked the front end of the broom up and to one side sharply.

Several students below screamed as he got closer... closer. and stopped not a foot away from one of the windows on the third floor of the school. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Harry urged the broomstick back to the ground, his heart pounding in his ears. When he reached the ground, a small group of students rushed over to him, patting him on the back and congratulating him for doing something so daring. Harry, feeling annoyed at the attention, pushed away from the group and headed for Dean Thomas.

Ignoring the insults that Malfoy was now calling out, Harry lobbed Neville's Remembrall at Dean, who caught it easily.

"Keep a good grip on that thing," Harry said, running a hand back through his hair. "I don't want to do that again..."

"Thanks, Harry... that was right nice of you..." Dean said, looking over the orb for any possible cracks in its surface.

Harry shrugged, a ghost of a smile on his face. "S'what friends are for, right?"

As Harry began to turn back towards Tonks and Solieyu, however, Harry noticed that the noise from the crowd had seemed to vanish. Once he was fully around, he understood why. Madam Hooch was standing not ten feet away. Beside her was tiny Professor Flitwick, looking quite out of breath.

"Harry! Harry!" Professor Flitwick cried as he rushed over to his student. "In all my time at Hogwarts, I've never seen one of my own doing something so...so... I don't know what got into you, but you should have been more careful! You could have been hurt!"

Harry blinked, watching his head of house squeak rapidly at him. It took him a few seconds to work through all that the professor had said, it had come out so quickly.

"Come with me now, Harry, if you would. Don't worry, I've already spoken to Madam Hooch about it..." Flitwick said, turning and motioning for Harry to follow.

Looking confused, Harry handed off his broom to Solieyu, who, like Tonks beside him, was watching Harry with a somewhat worried expression on his face.

"Professor," Harry began as the two started moving away from the rest of the students. "I can explain what happened... I know I wasn't supposed to--"

"Quiet now, Harry, there's something that needs to be done about this, but - oh, you had me frightened! I had just looked out the window you nearly crashed through, you know! Right this way, please!" Professor Flitwick said, leading Harry up the main stairway once they were back inside.

Up and up they climbed, Professor Flitwick going on and on about just how dangerous what he had done really was. Harry was beginning to wish he had just been able to block that idiot Malfoy's snide comments out of his mind. But then, he thought, what kind of a friend would he be? Even if he didn't know Neville all too well, the boy seemed nice enough. Certainly, he could use any help he could get. And, remembering what Dudley used to do to him, Harry couldn't help but help the smaller boy out.

"All these stairs," Professor Flitwick was saying, huffing and puffing a bit. "Not made for someone my size. Good exercise, but terrible in the mornings... now then, ah, here we are!"

Harry looked up and noted that they were outside of a classroom door. A very familiar one, in fact. Cracking the door open, Flitwick stuck his head inside. "Excuse me, Professor McGonagall? Do you think I could speak to Lynch for a moment?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. But a moment later, a lanky boy a good foot taller than Harry emerged from the Transfiguration classroom. He had long, sandy-blond hair pulled into a ponytail that nearly reached the middle of his back. His eyes were a strange shade of blue and,

currently, he was looking down at Professor Flitwick with a curious look in them.

"Lynch, my boy, I've found you a Seeker!" Flitwick squeaked, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet and clapping his hands together excitedly.

Lynch's expression went from curious to confused. His eyes moved from Flitwick to Harry and, after a moment, realization dawned in the boy's eyes. "You're serious, Professor?" He asked, looking back to Flitwick.

"Oh, yes, yes!" Flitwick said, bouncing slightly. "An absolute natural at it! Why, I saw him catch -- what was it you caught, Harry?"

"Uh... a...a Remembrall. Belongs to Neville Longbottom..." Harry said, not quite getting where the conversation was going.

"Ah, yes! A Remembrall! How silly of me... I saw him catch a Remembrall in his hand after what had to be a fifty-foot dive! He nearly came crashing through the window I was looking out of, but managed to bring his broomstick around to a halt. It's been a good, long while since I've seen anything like it!" Professor Flitwick said.

Lynch looked back to Harry, slowly sizing him up this time. His head began nodding slowly as he did so, a grin forming on his face. Harry saw that he was missing one of his canine teeth. "Have you ever seen a Quidditch match?" He asked Harry.

"No... I've read a bit about it, but... well, I haven't known about being a wizard for very long..." Harry admitted.

"Steven Lynch here is the captain of the Ravenclaw team!" Flitwick chimed in, smiling back and forth at his students.

"Well... I'll fill you in on anything you need to know. Blimey, it's like he was built for it, too. He's small and pretty thin... he's got to be fast!" Lynch said, his voice beginning to rise to that of the professor's in excitement. "Oh, but we'd need to get something that could utilize that frame of his, Professor..."

"I'll speak to Albus about it... Hopefully we can get around that first-year rule, eh? Oh, I *would* like to see the Cup back with us this year... didn't even make the finals last year." Flitwick said, shaking his head.

Lynch winced. "Yes, our team wasn't up to par last year, was it? Birman said he wasn't coming back this year, though, and Phiski graduated... we'll be better this year, Professor. I promise! And with Potter on the team..."

"We'll get the Cup back from Slytherin for sure!" Flitwick said, squeakily. "Professor Snape would be fit to be tied!"

Harry watched their conversation go back and forth, his mind slowly beginning to work out what was going on. Feeling more than a bit thick for not being able to work it out sooner, he opened his mouth and asked, "Wait, wait... I thought first-years couldn't..."

"That's what we'll be trying to get around!" Professor Flitwick said with a solemn nod. "Oh, I know Albus will let you fly, Harry! It's going to be wonderful!"

"So...I'm... I'm going to be..."

"Part of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team? If we play our cards right!" Said Lynch with an almost feral grin... or as feral as one could look with a missing canine tooth.

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"...That's..."

"No way! You can't be serious!"

Solieyu looked speechless. Tonks was practically bouncing in her seat at the Ravenclaw table. It was dinnertime, and Harry had just finished explaining why Flitwick had pulled him out of the remainder of their Flying class.

"First years are never allowed on house teams!" Tonks bounced. "You've gotta be the youngest--"

"--In a century. Yes, Flitwick told me. Then Steven told me. About a dozen times, in fact." Harry said, looking up the table. Steven Lynch was having a hushed, yet rapid conversation with a girl that looked to be around his age.

"Aw, Malfoy's gonna have kittens, Harry!" Tonks said, grinning. "That it's *his* fault you're on the team'll only make it worse!"

"I start training next week." Harry said, biting down a laugh. "Only don't tell anyone. Lynch seems to want to use me as a hidden weapon or something..."

"Right! Won't tell a soul! Right, Leon? ...Leon?" Tonks said, turning toward the boy, who looked a bit on the ill side. "Oi, you alright?"

"What? Oh, yes, I'm fine. Just feeling a bit sick to my stomach, I'm afraid. I think I should go see Madam Pomfrey again, perhaps..." Said Solieyu, rubbing at his forehead with a hand.

"You're too pale for your own good. Go on, before me an' Harry hafta carry you up! Can you get there alright on your own?" Tonks asked, tilting her head.

Solieyu smiled wanly as he stood. When he didn't wobble, he nodded to her. "I should be fine. I'm sorry for breaking off on you two like this. Especially with the good news. Congratulations Harry, really."

"Don't worry about it. We can't have you getting sick or something and missing my first game, can we?" Harry said, grinning slightly.

"Indeed we can't." Solieyu agreed. The boy turned and headed out of the Great Hall then, rubbing at his stomach slightly.

"I hope he's alright. Seems way too weak for his own good." Tonks said, watching him go.

"Yeah... I don't want to be rude and ask why he's always acting strangely, but... well, I guess I'm sort of curious." Harry admitted.

The two began eating again. But after a few minutes of relative silence, someone from up the table called his name loudly and yelled for him to 'Think fast!'

Harry looked up, only barely managing to shoot a hand up and grab something that had been thrown at him. His fingers sank into the object and, taking a look at it, he saw it to be a bread roll. Looking outright baffled, Harry looked back up the table and saw Lynch grinning that half-feral grin of his again. On the opposite side of the table from him, a chunky-looking boy was staring at him with widened eyes.

Tonks slung a roll back up the table, beaming Lynch in the side of the head. Harry stifled a snort.

"Tonks!"

"Well! He coulda thrown anything at you!" Tonks said, defensively.

"I think that the other guy is one of our Beaters...Timothy. somethingorother. I haven't got the names of the whole team memorized yet..." Harry said.

Tonks winced, then smiled apologetically up the table at the hefty boy, who rolled his eyes at her.

"Having a last meal, Potter?" Came a certain, drawling voice. "Been kicked out, I suppose... but that's what you get for breaking the rules..."

"Acting a lot braver now that you have your goons with you, are you?" Harry said, obviously annoyed at just how often Malfoy was popping up today.

Malfoy glared at him for a moment before smiling. "I'd take you on anytime on my own." He said, his smirk falling into place. "In fact, how about tonight? A Wizard's duel. Wands only - no contact. What's wrong, Potter? Never heard of a Wizard's duel before?"

"Course he has." Tonks scowled. "I'm his second. Gonna use one o' those two human shields as yours?"

Malfoy looked back at Crabbe and Goyle, taking into account which was bigger. "...Yeah, Crabbe is, I suppose. Is midnight alright? We'll meet in the trophy room - it's always unlocked..."

"Fine." Harry said, dismissively.

Seemingly satisfied, Malfoy and his cronies headed off toward the Slytherin table. Once he was out of earshot, Harry asked, "What's a Wizard's duel? And what'd you mean, you're my second?"

"Second takes over if ya die." Tonks said, shrugging. "But people only die in proper duels an' stuff. Doubt Malfoy could pluck a chicken using magic. You can't honestly be thinkin' about fightin' him, can you?"

"Of course not. Let the ponce stand around all night if he wants. I've got more important things to do than run around after hours. Besides, he'll be getting what's coming to him this weekend." Harry said, waving a hand in a vague gesture.

"That's the spirit. Besides, we need sleep tonight. Potions is tomorrow." Tonks said with a grimace.

"Don't remind me. Every time I've tried looking at Snape, it seems like he's glaring at me...no idea why." Harry said, glancing sideways up at the staff table briefly. "Just the same, I don't think I'd want to fall asleep in his class."

"Whattaya think Fred an' George are gonna choose, anyway?" Tonks asked.

"No idea. I'm almost hoping for Number Eighty-One right now. I'd really love seeing Malfoy walk around looking like he had a broom jammed up his backside." Harry said.

"Ooh, that'd be fitting, alright... Me, I was kinda hopin' for Number One-Twenty."

"One-Twenty? What, you want to see Malfoy get the infinite itching powder down the pants?"

"Too right I do." Tonks said. "He wouldn't be able to stop scratching! Everyone would think he's wrong in the head. And just think of what he'd have to go through for someone to fix it."

"Ooh, I see now..." Harry said, grinning. "...Maybe they could do both at once."

"I'd pay good money to see that."

"So would I."

"Well, we'd better get goin'...I wanna fill ya in on what happened after you left. Madam Hooch really laid into Malfoy, y'know." Tonks said as she took a final gulp of pumpkin juice.

"Really?" Harry asked, standing after he popping a final bite of apple pie into his mouth.

"Yup! She an' Flitwick seemed to pop in outta nowhere. And Malfoy looked so bloody *smug* when you got toted off! Guess he thought you were gettin' into trouble. Ohh, if only he knew..." Tonks trailed off.

"He'll know soon enough." Harry said, a grim smile on his face. "He'll know soon enough..."

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Author's Note: On to a few short notes. I know I said it before, but I really like that people are wondering if Leon's a dark creature or not. It seems the majority has him pegged as a werewolf. Ahh, but is he or is he not? Well, saying one way or the other would ruin any surprises I might have up my sleeve, yes?

As for Tonks' lack of clumsiness... no, I didn't forget. Remember, puberty hasn't set in just yet. It'll come about with time, don't worry. There are a couple of things I have specially planned that concern her tripping up at the wrong moment, some may or may not be used in a fluff-inducing manner. Tripping and causing Harry to become a human cushion to soften the impact, for instance...

As for Harry's attitude...he's Harry Potter. He would've worked in any of the houses. He's got enough of what each house likes to have in it all rolled into one. He might not be the best at what he does, but he will go about things a bit more intelligently than he might have if placed elsewhere...

As a final note, I do hope you enjoyed Number Forty-Eight.

Chapter 13 – Potions and Ponderings

Harry woke up early the next morning. His stomach felt like it was full of knots, though he couldn't quite place the reason. As he got dressed, he passed it off as a general nervousness toward his upcoming Potions class. Having Potions on Friday, he had had plenty of chances to overhear stories being told about Professor Snape, who was said to be kind to no one but those from his own house.

Harry looked around his dorm to see whether or not anyone else was up after he rubbed the remaining sleep from his eyes. Terry was tangled up in his sheets, which were in a terrible state from a night's worth of tossing and turning. Eric looked like he was about a minute away from falling off of his bed entirely. Gary seemed to be dreaming about something strange, as he would occasionally bat at thin air. Solieyu, Harry noted, wasn't in bed.

Wondering where on earth his friend could possibly be at six in the morning, Harry quietly left the dorm and headed down to the common room. As he walked, Harry thought about his pale friend a bit more than he had since meeting him. There was no doubt that the boy looked a bit shy of ill, though he never seemed to show any signs of sickness. Harry knew that his health certainly wasn't as good as any of the other students - Solieyu himself had said that at one point.

He had looked quite full of energy the previous day in History of Magic, though. But, Harry concluded, Solieyu HAD gone to see Madam Pomfrey before class had started. There was something decidedly awkward about his friend, though he wasn't quite sure what it was.

The boy seemed to shy away from public places, choosing to study on his own up in the dorm than to stay in the common room with everyone else. Even after Tonks had asked him to hang around and play a game of Exploding Snap - something that had intrigued Harry quite a bit...until he wound up with a face full of soot - Solieyu had excused himself.

Running a hand back through his hair, Harry figured he'd ask Tonks what she thought the next chance that he got. Maybe she had been able to get some information out of Solieyu. Harry wasn't even sure

why he was so bugged by his friend's behavior - for all he knew, Solieyu just had a bad immune system or something. But bug him it did, and he wanted to put to rest the tiny voice in the back of his mind that kept throwing questions out.

Not surprisingly, the common room was empty when he arrived. Walking over to one of the room's few windows, Harry gazed outside. The sun was up, though only just, casting vibrant hues of orange and yellow across the school grounds. Harry wished that he could have gone and relaxed out by the lake instead of being forced down into the dungeons for a class that included Draco Malfoy. But fate was fate, and it seemed to enjoy toying with him.

Figuring to get an early start on breakfast, Harry headed through the arched entrance to the common room and bid a good morning to Walter. The portrait swung open lazily, allowing Harry to walk on out and greet the old wizard properly. "I hope I didn't wake you up..." Harry said, watching Walter let out a long yawn.

The wizard waved an old hand dismissively, offering Harry a somewhat sleepy smile. "Not at all, not at all. I'm surprised to see you up at this hour, though."

"Couldn't sleep. My first Potions class is today... and from all of the rumors I've heard, Professor Snape isn't exactly the cheerful type." Harry explained.

"Ah, yes... I'm afraid that Severus has always been that way. Before I was moved to this position, my portrait hung in the hospital wing. Sadly enough, Severus seemed to show up more than his fair share." Walter said, stroking his long beard slowly. "But I'm sure I've said a bit too much. Shall I assume you're going down to eat?"

Before Harry could say anything, however, his stomach let out a low growl. Both Harry and Walter looked at the boy's misfortune for a moment before Harry smiled apologetically. "I guess I am headed there, then..." He said. "Will you let Tonks know? Oh, and Leon, if you see him?"

"Of course." Walter said, stretching and wincing a bit as various bones popped and cracked. "Though it's been a good three hours since I let Mister Reinhardt out..."

"Three?" Harry said, raising an eyebrow. "What did he want out at three in the morning for?"

"Ahh, I believe he said that he was feeling a bit under the weather and was wanting to go see Madam Pomfrey." Walter said, tilting his head slightly in thought. "Perhaps whatever she gave to him helped him get back to sleep... in any case, I'll be sure to tell your friends where you've gone."

"Thanks." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "Have a good day, Walter!"

"And to you as well, Mister Potter." Said the portrait.

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As Harry headed for the main stairway, his brain returned to wondering what was wrong with his friend. He had hoped to put the thoughts to rest - at least until his Potions class was out of the way and he had some time to relax. But they didn't want to stay away. What Walter had said seemed interesting to Harry. Maybe the reason that his friend always seemed so sickly was due to a simple lack of sleep. Harry had once fell ill after a particularly painful happening back at Number Four... he hadn't been able to sleep properly for days. It had left him looking rather drained and kept him moving sluggishly.

Sighing, Harry pushed the thoughts away. He had reached the main stairway and was descending, the thought of breakfast forcing his brain to prioritize things a bit more efficiently. When he entered the Great Hall, he saw that he was one of only a handful of people there. Professor Dumbledore was sitting at the staff table, looking over an important-looking document as he chatted away with a witch that Harry had only seen once before during the start-of-term feast. There were a pair of Hufflepuff students - fifth or sixth years from the look of it - at their table, and a single Gryffindor was taking up the space of a couple people as he stretched his legs out.

Though there wasn't food on the tables yet, the smell of breakfast seemed to be coming from somewhere. Taking it into account and filing the detail away, Harry walked to the Ravenclaw table and took his usual spot toward the end of it. For the next half hour, Harry was alone with his thoughts. The only sounds came from the two Hufflepuffs, who seemed to be talking about Quidditch.

As seven crept closer, food began magically appearing across the various tables in the Great Hall. Students were soon drifting in, as well. Some looking half-asleep, some looking nervous, and some looking outright cranky. A lanky, sixth year Ravenclaw boy came striding in after holding the door open for a pair of first year Gryffindor girls. Harry recognized him as Ray Gainsborough, the Keeper for the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. Steven Lynch, who was the head Chaser for the team, had introduced Harry to the other team members the previous night after everyone had returned from dinner and various late-night classes. It was nice putting faces to the names that the team captain had told Harry shortly after meeting him.

"Mornin' Harry." Ray said in a polite tone as he passed. Harry nodded and smiled to him, watching as he picked a spot further up the table to sit. There were three girls and four boys on their team, including him. Steven had gathered them all together, insisting that the common room be as close to empty as possible before letting everyone in on the secret. Though shocked, the other members of the Quidditch team had slowly began sizing Harry up as Steven explained why he would be playing for them.

Ellie Shott, one of the two Beaters, had seemed to pay the least attention to Steven, instead choosing to gaze at the teen throughout most of his speech. Harry couldn't shake the feeling that she fancied him. The other Beater was the chunky boy who had thrown a roll at him the previous night, a fourth year by the name of Timothy Ratchett. He helped Steven sell the story of how keen Harry's reflexes were.

The two other Chasers on the team were a pair of girls - a sixth year named Carol Allenby and a fourth year named Melissa Tracer. The former had wildly unkempt brown hair, making it look as if she and Harry went to the same barber shop. Melissa, on the other hand, seemed almost shy to be introduced to Harry, who had just nodded to

everyone as Steven pointed them out. And then Ray was their Keeper and was a quiet, yet quite polite sixth year who was quite possibly the tallest person in the whole of Ravenclaw.

As Harry began filling his poor, empty stomach, more of the Quidditch team members filed in, each greeting Harry quickly as they passed by. After awhile, an almost disheveled-looking Tonks came wandering into the Great Hall, her hair long and pink this morning. She flopped down beside Harry and began mumbling about needing something sweet to wake her up properly. Harry rolled his eyes and helped her get food onto her plate without knocking anything over. Tonks seemed to vary between being a morning person and being the type that's completely useless before they get food into them. Harry wasn't quite sure why.

Toward the end of breakfast, when Tonks had finally gotten herself fully awake, Solieyu slipped in. Sitting down opposite Harry and Tonks, he looked at Harry and murmured, "Keep a close eye on Malfoy today, Harry. I caught him bragging to a couple of older Slytherins on my way down."

"So what else is new?" Tonks grumbled through a mouthful of egg.

"He seems to think he's superior to you since you didn't show up for the duel he challenged you to." Solieyu explained.

Harry rolled his eyes. "He thinks he's superior to everyone. I don't care what the idiot says."

"Yes, well... just the same, keep your eyes open." Solieyu said, looking around before taking a goblet and peering at its contents for a moment. Almost in a trance for a moment, he finally looked back to Harry and added, "You were up early this morning."

"Huh? How'd you know?" Harry asked, patting Tonks on the back after a gulp of pumpkin juice went down the wrong way.

"Walter told me." Solieyu said simply, taking a more sensible drink.

"You're one to talk." Harry said as Tonks recovered. "He said you went out at three."

"Mm..." Solieyu replied, gazing down at the table. Harry followed his gaze and found it resting on a rather sizable bit of ham, which was cut into slices of varying thicknesses.

"Hungry?" Harry asked.

"Hm? Oh, no... no, I haven't been feeling well this morning... it's why I was out in the middle of the night." Solieyu said, pulling his gaze away from the meat with a grimace. With a barely audible sigh, he took a sip of pumpkin juice. "Madam Pomfrey tricked me into taking a sleeping potion. I suppose I should be glad that I was able to go and get my supplies for Potions and get down here before breakfast was over..."

Filing away the strange look on his friend's face a moment before, Harry nodded. "I didn't sleep well for awhile a few years ago. It made me all pale and weak and stuff for a few days... hope you get to feeling better."

Solieyu offered up a faint smile in return, though Harry was running over various things in his mind even as he spoke. He was looking at a puzzle that was missing most of its pieces... he didn't like that.

"Not feeling up to eating anything?" Tonks asked, being slightly more careful with her food and drink now.

"I ate up in the hospital wing..." Solieyu said offhandedly.

"Didn't know Madam Pomfrey let students eat up there." Tonks said, an eyebrow raised.

"Eh? Oh, I... I mean she gave me a couple of potions to take to help ward off the effects of the sleeping potion. Unfortunately, one of the side effects was to kill my already meager appetite... I'm sorry, I guess I'm still not altogether here today..." Solieyu said with what could have been a scowl.

"Ahh..." Said Tonks, finishing off a piece of toast. "Oi, Harry, what were *you* doin' up so early? Walter said you left around daybreak. What on earth wouldja wanna crawl outta bed *that* early for?"

Harry shrugged. "Couldn't sleep. Too busy wondering whether all of the rumors about Professor Snape are true or not..."

"Well, he's certainly not gonna run up an' give ya a welcoming hug, if that's whatcha mean." Tonks said, glancing up at the staff table for a brief moment. At some point, Snape had slipped in and was quietly eating, casting the occasional glare toward Professor Quirrell, who looked as nervous as he ever did.

"I'd turn and run if he tried." Harry said with a chuckle.

"Yes, you seem quite good at running." Came an annoyingly familiar voice from nearby. "I see that you still had the nerve to show up after backing out of our duel last night, Potter."

"And a good morning to you too, Malfoy." Harry said, dryly. "I've got better things to do than wander all over the castle in the dead of night, looking for you."

"Cowering in your common room, were you?" Said Draco Malfoy, looking cockier than ever. "I can't say as I blame you, though... I AM a force to be reckoned with..."

Crabbe and Goyle, who were flanking their leader as usual, let out dumb laughs at this. Draco flashed them, then the Slytherin table a grin.

"I don't cower, Malfoy." Harry said. Looking briefly to Tonks, he grinned and added, "Not anymore. Now, if you'll be so kind as to find your *own* table, I'd like to get back to eating. You do know the way, don't you? I can get a professor to help guide you, if you'd like..."

As Tonks flushed slightly, Malfoy seemed to as well. Narrowing his eyes, the blonde growled, "You ought to watch your mouth, Potter. If my father were here..."

"He'd what? Protecting his ickle Drakiekins from big, bad Harry Potter?" Tonks said, clasping her hands together and batting her eyelashes as she fell into a sickeningly-accurate imitation of Draco (right down to hairstyle and eyecolor) as she whimpered, "Daddy! Harry Potter's smarter than I am, go beat him uuuuuup!"

Of course, her voice was loud enough that the better portion of the general area could overhear. As Tonks changed her hair and eyes back to what they had been upon her entrance, she smirked as a smattering of hushed laughter filled the air. If looks could kill, Tonks would have been dead on the spot. Instead choosing to hiss out a warning to watch her back, Malfoy turned and tried to casually saunter over toward the Slytherin table. Of course, this only made several students snicker louder.

"Git." Harry murmured. "Honestly, what's he trying to do? Defeat me by trying to hurt my feelings?"

"It wouldn't hurt to pay attention to his warning, though." Solieyu said softly. "His father is rather powerful... as he could very well be."

"Oh, don't worry. He couldn't hurt a fly if his pathetic life depended on it. He went down from one punch - what's he gonna do? Bleed on us?" Tonks said, shivering as she took a drink of pumpkin juice. "And while I'm on the subject, if I ever feel like changing my looks to match his, smack me or somethin'..."

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Whatever Harry was preparing himself for, it wasn't enough. As he, Tonks, and Solieyu had made their way down into the dungeons, the air turned quite clammy. It was a very uncomfortable place to be in and Harry couldn't help but wonder how the Slytherins got on down in such a place.

The Potions classroom didn't help. Cauldrons seemed to be everywhere and Harry could have sworn to have seen something's eyeballs in a jar as they entered. The trio sat near one another, with Tonks being in between both Harry and Solieyu. Harry wasn't sure why, but he didn't want to let Tonks take the aisle seat.

When Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins entered not long after, he felt himself tense up slightly. Though he tried to put on an air of indifference in front of his friends, Harry made sure not to take anyone too lightly. After all, he was just figuring out what magic really was. Malfoy could have been taught loads of things, coming from a wizarding family and all.

Professor Snape seemed to almost glide into the room, his movement was so smooth. Though he wouldn't win an award for gracefulness from anyone, the man did know how to move about. The room had gone deathly quiet upon his arrival, which seemed to be the correct thing to do. As Snape turned to survey the new group of students, he sneered.

After he snatched the the list of students from his desk, he began taking the roll, just as Professor Flitwick had done. But unlike his head of house, when Snape got to Harry's name, a very different conversation took place.

"Ah, yes... Harry Potter. Our new...celebrity." Snape said, his voice soft. "Let me explain something to you... no matter how you are treated by the other members of staff, you will get no special treatment from *me*."

Harry's eyes quickly locked with Tonks' after this exchange took place, Snape continuing down the roll. It seemed as if the rumors were not only true, but they were lacking quite a bit. Snape didn't seem to just be unsociable, he seemed to be out and out hateful.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making..." Snape began, pacing slowly in front of his desk as his eyes wandered across various students. "There will be no simple flicks of the wrist or incantation memorizing here...and I don't expect many of you to understand the true beauty of what you have come here to try and learn..."

"In fact, I doubt many of you will be good at this subject at all. Call it a...hunch..." Snape continued, looking directly at Harry as he said this. From across the room, Malfoy snickered. If Snape heard him, he didn't say anything. Instead, the professor continued, "But if you somehow turn out not to be a bunch of simpering idiots, there is much

to be learned...I can teach you how to bottle fame...brew glory... even stopper death... but I will not waste my time on those who have no capacity for learning."

Silence followed the end of Snape's introductory speech. Suddenly, the professor turned on Harry and, in a voice that made everyone jump, said "Potter! What would I get if I were to mix powdered Manticore horns with the crushed roots of a withering elm?"

Harry briefly wondered what Snape was playing at. Surely, the professor knew of his background - that he could hardly know the answer. Especially when suddenly asked during his very first Potions class. With a one-shouldered shrug, he said, "I don't know, *sir*." Adding the 'sir' took more than a bit of effort as he heard Malfoy begin snickering again.

"Clearly," Snape said, the ghost of a smirk on his face, "fame isn't everything... now, let us try again... Where would you look if I asked you to find me a Stolas' foot?"

"At the end of a Stolas, sir?" Harry offered.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I suggest you begin taking things a bit more seriously, Potter. You never know when you might find yourself in a position where you need to actually use whatever passes for a brain..."

Harry bit back a snort. Whatever Snape had lodged up his backside, it wasn't going to force Harry to back down from that gaze of his. There was something about defiantly staring back into Snape's black eyes that made him uncomfortable... but he wasn't about to lose face in front of the Slytherins. No more than he was forced to, anyway.

"What is the effect of garlic on a vampire, Potter?" Snape said, trying yet again.

"Same effect on any other creature?" Harry suggested.

Though Snape twitched, he pressed on. "And that would *be*?"

"Bad breath." Harry said. Tonks let out a snort, but tried to hide it in a cough. She certainly didn't want Snape glaring in *her* direction.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw for smarting off." Snape said, coolly. "For your information, powdered Manticore horns and the crushed roots of a withering elm come together to form a rather deadly poison that eats away at the drinker's internal organs... the Stolas keeps mostly to northern Romania and only comes out during the full moon... and garlic has the distinct property of being able to ward a vampire away due to the scent being as good as poison to the vampire's unique body chemistry."

Snape paused, then turned to face the students as a whole and snapped, "Well? Why aren't you all copying this down?"

Things didn't seem to improve any after the introductions were over with, either. If anything, they seemed to get worse. The class was sorted into pairs and began working on a simple potion that cured acne. Harry got paired up with Tonks, but Solieyu got stuck working with a beefy-looking Slytherin boy.

Snape walked around the classroom, watching the students crush muggleweed and chop up what seemed to be an oversized rooster's wattle. They were to add the wattle bits after the muggleweed, right at the point where the potion turned green and began to boil. If everything went correctly, they would wind up with a slightly-pink brew that smelled strongly of apricots.

Harry and Tonks' potion ended up being rather purple and had the distinct smell of a drainage ditch.

Snape took one look at their result and glared, ordering that they start over and do things properly this time. They did so, though Tonks kept muttering darkly under their breath at having to handle the giant wattle again. It felt like a cold, sweaty hand with no bones.

From somewhere on the Slytherin's side of the room, a loud *BANG* resounded, causing everyone to look up. Crabbe and Goyle were covered in a yellow goop that seemed to be slowly eating away at whatever it touched. Snape quickly swept over and banished the ooze with a flick of his wand, then spun around and glared at Harry.

"You, Potter! Why didn't you warn them not to stick the muddleweed in last! Five more points from Ravenclaw..."

By now, Harry felt outraged. How could Snape have possibly have expected him to keep track of everyone's cauldrons at the same time as his? As far as he was concerned, Snape didn't just seem to dislike him. For whatever reason, Snape seemed to outright HATE him. Any small thing that went wrong for the rest of the class, Harry got called on for not being able to prevent. Every so often, Snape would throw another ingredients question out to Harry, who would try and politely state that he didn't know. He had lost his house enough points for one class.

When it had finally ended, Harry's group was the first to exit. Once they were away from the Potions classroom, Tonks had erupted into a tirade about what an unfair, slimy, greasy git Snape was. Harry was inclined to agree. Solieyu seemed strangely quiet, though he did chime in once, saying that he thought that Snape might be jealous of Harry's fame.

"I didn't ask for it." Harry grumbled as they headed back up to Ravenclaw Tower to deposit their books and supplies. "The rumors weren't accurate enough. He's as bad as Malfoy. I wonder if we could get the twins to prank *him* a time or two..."

Tonks looked at him for a moment before asking, "Number Eighty-Two?"

"Number Eighty-Two." Harry confirmed.

"What," Solieyu asked after a moment of silence, "is Number Eighty-Two, praytell?"

"You remember how Fred and George turned Malfoy into a clown? That was one of the things on our Anti-Malfoy list. Number Eighty-Two involves a hungry alleycat, a tin of tuna, a rubber balloon, and five gallons of paint."

Solieyu opened his mouth, quite clearly not following his friends' line of reasoning, but closed it. The less he heard, he figured, the better.

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"I told you to get to work!"

A bruise formed on his cheek.

"Now get busy! If I have to warn you one more time..."

A vase shattered and he landed in the pieces, cutting his arm in several places.

"WHAT HAVE WE TOLD YOU ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS?"

A pair of ribs had been bruised after that.

"GET IN THERE! HOW DARE YOU ASK US TO TAKE YOU TO A DOCTOR!"

One black eye, another cracked rib, and a twisted knee had been the result that time. In addition, sleep hadn't come well for him until his flu had passed. He didn't eat for almost three days.

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Harry's eyes snapped open and he sat up in bed quickly. Taking in where he was, he let out a breath that he hadn't realized he had been holding in. Swallowing hard, he forced himself to stop shaking long enough to get out of bed and get dressed. Before leaving the dorm room, he grabbed his Charms book for some light reading.

Carefully, Harry opened the door and slipped out, closing it just as quietly. Letting out a louder sigh this time, he headed downstairs. For the second time in as many days, he was up around sunrise. It was something he hoped wouldn't become a regular occurrence. Peeking into the common room, he found it was empty. Not surprising, really, he thought as he walked over to a secluded chair and sat.

Flipping open his Charms book to one of the later chapters, he let his eyes glance over the pages. He hadn't really had a spare moment by himself that he could just sit and read in. If he wasn't in classes, he was hanging out with Tonks and Solieyu. Usually they spent their

time down by the lake, though they had wandered about the castle a little. The previous evening, Terry Boot had tried once again to wrangle him into coming with he and Gary on their exploration of the third floor's off-limits corridor. He was unsuccessful.

To Harry, it all still felt like a wonderful dream; something he might wake up from at any given time. It had all happened so quickly, as well. It had only been a few short months since he and Tonks had met in the park, after all. And now here he was - at a beautiful castle that taught magic. The Dursleys wouldn't treat him poorly any longer. In fact, Harry often wondered if he would ever have to see Number Four, Privet Drive ever again. Both of the Tonks women seemed perfectly happy having him around. And they didn't care that he was famous... that was important to him.

Harry was thankful that most of the pointing and whispering had begun to peter out. He really didn't think of himself as someone important.

He was just Harry - someone who had been little more than a beaten, poorly fed slave up until a few months ago. Suddenly realizing that he had lost himself in thought, Harry blinked a few times to try and clear his head. He looked back down at his Charms book and started flipping through the pages, stopping briefly whenever something caught his eye.

"Lesse... a charm for making flowers appear. Might be interesting to see Malfoy show up to breakfast with a dozen pink posies in his hair. ...A charm for conjuring an apple? Guess it's useful for between-meal snacking..." He murmured quietly as his eyes scanned the pages.

His stomach growling, Harry looked back at the book. "Well... it couldn't hurt to try."

Harry took his wand out and read over the instructions to the charm careful. There was a moving diagram of how the wrist movement should look like. Holding his left hand out in hopes of catching any falling fruit, Harry concentrated hard on the proper motion and gave his wand a pair of sharp flicks. An apple core with a worm curled around it fell into his left hand. Harry scowled.

"Right, let's try that again..."

A good hour later, other students began groggily working their way into the common room, only to be greeted by a rather peculiar sight. Harry Potter was sitting in a corner of the common room with no fewer than two dozen apple parts surrounding the chair he was in. Some were nothing but cores. Some looked to be nothing but the skin of an apple. There were a number of detached stems, and one student thought she saw a worm wriggling its way across the room.

Harry, paying little attention to anything else that was going on, was just trying to get his stomach to shut up now. He had tried to get the spell to work, but he wasn't exactly being successful. At one point, he had pondered cutting his loses and bodging the various bits and pieces together to, in effect, form a single apple. But he had quickly dismissed the thought as he didn't have any utensils and wasn't about to try slicing things magically. Especially when he couldn't conjure a proper apple TO slice.

"Ah, no, you're doing it wrong..." Came a voice from beside his chair. Looking up, he saw a seventh year girl he wasn't familiar with. He blinked at her once, then nodded down at the open book on his lap. "I'm doing it just like he is!" Harry protested, frowning a little.

"No, no, look closer. See how he's wiggling the tip of his wand just a bit right at the very end? You didn't look like you were doing that" Said the girl.

Harry looked back down at the diagram and, watching very closely, did notice that the wizard in it wiggled the end of his wand at the end. But it was so faint, he hadn't ever noticed it before. Feeling more than a little annoyed, Harry tried one last time to produce an apple. At the very least, he'd have something to nosh on while making his way down for breakfast.

He flicked his wand twice, then wiggled the tip of it just slightly. This time, a slightly small, but entirely whole apple appeared in his left hand. Harry smile, then looked up and thanked the seventh year, who grinned at him before joining her friends again.

"Here's to hoping there isn't another worm in it." Harry said to no one in particular as he went to put his book away. As he walked back up

to the first year dorm, he took a big bite out of the apple he had produced.

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Author's Notes: Well, I originally planned to make this one a BIT longer. But writer's block struck me dead around Friday night. I'd hoped to get this out before Sunday the 5th was over...I guess I kinda did, since I'm shipping this off to my beta tonight... but it still counts as Monday. I had intended for the weekend prank to be pulled off... but I changed my mind as I changed my chapter guide a bit. I've already broken away from it by combining one chapter into two... So the total looks like it's gonna be a bit shorter than the 31 chapters I'd originally planned. Then again, I didn't plan to be writing such LONG chapters, either. Saa na, it can't be helped, I guess. At least I can get started on Chapter 14 tonight, though. Rarely will I go over a full week without getting a chapter out.

Since I didn't have the Midnight Duel take place, a few chapters went out the window. Namely the introduction of Fluffy and the trip into the forest, which was set to be a two-parter.

Instead, I think I'll throw in a bit of filler to flesh out the characters a bit more. I've got an idea for having one chapter per book dedicated to those around Harry, noticing how he changes and acts as he grows. Good idea? Bad idea? Anyway, as you may have noticed, Harry's done a lot of thinking in this way. Very quick to notice that his friend doesn't seem quite right. But then, he isn't in Ravenclaw for anything. Under that poor, abused exterior lies a true thinker. I just need to bring it out.

Chapter 14 – What Lies Hidden

"You gonna spend all day sitting over there, reading?"

The voice made Harry look up. He was sitting in a chair near the corner of the common room - one he had happily proclaimed to be 'his'

earlier in the day. Harry had been reading before he had been interrupted by his best friend, who was currently standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

"Can't help it. It's interesting." Harry said, looking mildly surprised as he checked the time, finding it to be nearly three in the afternoon.

Rolling her eyes, Tonks sat on the arm of the chair and peered down at the book in Harry's right hand. It was rather small and looked to be fairly old, as well. One of the pages that Harry was on had a large chunk taken out of the upper-right side.

"What's it about?" She finally asked.

"Various magical creatures." Harry replied with a shrug. "Stuff I never thought was real. Vampires, werewolves, yetis... that kind of thing. Kind of surprised that yetis can hypnotise people, but it does explain away a lot of the sightings, doesn't it?"

"My Uncle Franklin said he saw a yeti once." Tonks said, looking thoughtful for a moment. "He was vacationing in the mountains and swears one came into his camp and ate all of his frankfurters."

"Why would a yeti risk being seen just for that?" Harry asked, closing the book and setting it on a conveniently-placed table next to 'his' chair. "Couldn't be that starved for food. And why just the franks? Why not the people camping there? The book said that yetis don't care what they eat as long as it's meat. Humans would qualify..."

"Mum asked the same thing. Uncle Franklin said that he guessed the yeti had a craving or something, I dunno. Anyway, Harry, what time d'ya wanna start workin' on your Metamorphmagus training?" Tonks said, swirling a strand of long, brown hair around one of her fingers.

"Dunno. Let's find an empty classroom to practice in, though. I don't want anyone to know about it." Harry said, looking up at Tonks.

Tonks was grinning. "Yeah, let's. Hopefully Malfoy won't be snogging one of his two sea cows."

Harry snorted. "Ah, that was brilliant, wasn't it?" He said fondly, remembering the scene that the two had walked in on upon entering the Great Hall for breakfast...

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Unable to find Solieyu, as usual, Harry and Tonks walked down to the Great Hall, all the while discussing what Fred and George Weasley might have in store for Malfoy this time. As they drew nearer, they started hearing loud noises coming from inside. Once at the bottom of the main stairway, they realized it was laughter. Looking to each other, the two rushed into the Great Hall.

"I'll love you both until I die,
When you two aren't 'round, I feel I'll cry!
My heart, it aches, when we aren't near.
But once together, I'll never fear!
Your heads are round and so is mine,
and I think you both have great behinds!
Oh, tell me I'll be ever yours,
and I promise to do all your chores!
My heart has found its place with you,
and I know that my love is truuuuue!
'Til dying breaths we all shall take,
a perfect life for you I'll make!
My love is true, my heart is loyal,
please be mine, oh Crabbe and Goooooooyle!"

It was the strangest sight that Harry and Tonks had ever seen. Draco Malfoy was down on one knee in front of his two flunkies, crooning a love ballad so loud that the entire great hall could hear him. His face looked horrified as he sang in a girlishly-sweet voice, as if he would rather be anywhere but where he was. In addition, he was wearing the frilliest pink robes ever seen in Hogwarts. His hair was also a light pink and was more frazzled than Harry's could ever hope to be. He

held a bouquet of roses in one hand and a cupcake in another. And the whole of the Great Hall was roaring with laughter - even the Slytherins.

Except, of course, for Crabbe and Goyle, who looked confused and terrified that their leader was suddenly confessing his love for them in song.

After his song was finished, Malfoy began repeating it, a look of pure anguish on his face as he forcefully thrust the bouquet to Goyle and the cupcake to Crabbe.

"Number..."

"Sixty-one...!"

Harry and Tonks exchanged another look, began snorting, and eventually dissolved into peals of laughter, joining the other students in the Great Hall.

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"I don't think I've ever laughed that hard in my life. Malfoy looked murderous once Professor Snape finally fixed him." Harry said, grinning at the still-fresh memory.

"They even got the pink robes right!" Tonks said, grinning as well. "The hair was a nice touch, though. And the cupcakes and flower bouquet."

"I think we should tell the twins to hold off on the next one for a few weeks, though." Harry said, a thoughtful look on his face. "They've gotten Malfoy twice this week... so he's going to be jumpy for awhile, I reckon."

"So we wait until he gets back to acting cocky, *then* let the twins at him again?" Tonks asked.

"Bingo." Harry said, finally pulling himself out of the chair he was in. "It works better when Malfoy isn't expecting it. If he's looking left and

right all the time to see if he's going to be jinxed, it ruins the randomness."

Stretching, Harry let out a groan as his back popped in at least five spots. Tonks hopped off the arm of the chair, wincing at the noise coming from her friend.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

"Of course I'm ready!" Tonks said, a gleam in her eyes. "If you're a Metamorphmagus like I am... well... just think of the pranks we could pull *then!*"

Harry smiled, heading through the pathway out of the common room. "Ah, the possibilities. I hope Malfoy's spooked enough to jump at any little noise he hears. Nothing like a paranoid ponce to give you a good laugh."

"Couldn't agree more, mate!" Tonks said, slinging an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Now then, off we go! Can't sit around and lounge about all day - we've got work to do."

The portrait of Walter the Wise swung open as they drew closer to it, letting them out and shutting behind them. The old wizard in the portrait smiled as the two headed away from him. It had been a good while, after all, since a pair such as they had been in the house he guarded.

"Wonder where Leon is." Harry said a few minutes later. "I haven't seen him all day."

"Probably in the hospital wing. If he isn't back by the time we get back in, let's go look for him." Tonks replied.

"Yeah... while we're there, we could warn Madam Pomfrey that she ought to be prepared for two near-casualties later, too."

"Still thinking about Terry and...what's his name?" Tonks asked.

"It's Gary... and yeah. I dunno why they want to go exploring it. I mean, if someone told me there was a huge, man-eating crocodile

somewhere, I wouldn't go *looking* for it. I'd leave well enough alone. Dumbledore knows what he's doing, doesn't he?" Harry said.

"Guess so." Tonks said with a shrug. "He warned everyone to keep out, so if anyone gets hurt, it's their own fault. Oh, hey, how about this one?"

Tonks had turned and was peering into a room. Harry came over and pushed the door all the way open, looking in, as well. The room didn't look quite big enough to be a classroom, but it was too big to be a closet. There were numerous chairs and desks pushed up against the walls and stacked in the corners.

"Storage area?" Harry asked, walking in.

"Must be... dunno why they'd need it, though. Couldn't they just conjure whatever needs replacing?" Tonks asked, poking one of the chairs.

"I have a feeling there are a lot of strange things here." Harry said, dryly. "Anyway, this is as good a place as any. Let's get to work."

Tonks and Harry each grabbed a chair from the stacks, taking them out to the center of the room and sitting down on them. Facing each other, Harry looked at his friend expectantly. Tonks blinked, then made a face and said, "Right... um... Oh, bloody hell, I've never taught someone something. How should I start?"

"I dunno. I've never had someone tutor me." Harry said with a shrug. "How did you learn to change your features around?"

Tonks looked up at the ceiling for a moment before slowly replying, "Well... Mum told me a story one time. 'Bout how she woke up to find me with long, green hair one day back when I was still a baby. She didn't really explain until much later...y'know, after I could read. She told me about Metamorphmagi being really rare... and that I probably wasn't going to be able to find someone to teach me how to control my power. So she found me all the best books she could. Wonder if she still has 'em..."

"I wouldn't mind looking through them if she does." Harry said.

"Yeah, I'll owl her later and see. Anyway, my hair kept changing color and length for awhile... I remember waking up *bald* one morning, if you can believe that." Tonks said, scowling at the memory. Her scowl deepened when she saw Harry trying to bite back a grin. "Oh, sod off. Anyway, I remember waking up bald and heading to the loo t'wash my hands and face before breakfast, right? Well, I look up at myself an' **BAM**, no hair. Woke me right up, I'll tell ya that.

"Well, I was pretty sick o' not being able to keep my hair in check at that point. Especially since it was really nice the day before. All blonde and wavy... I got all mad and started yelling at my reflection to blow off some steam. I know I was remembering my wavy hair from the previous day when I was doin' it, too. I had squeezed my eyes shut towards the end and when I opened 'em again... well, my hair was back. And blonde an' wavy, to boot. Took me awhile to realize how I did it. Basically, you just hafta imagine yourself how you *want* to look. I know it sounds easy, but I still don't have it all the way down. I can just change my hair an' eyes right now. Full-fledged Metamorphmagi can change just about *anything*..."

"Sounds impressive." Harry said, taking in everything his friend had said. "I guess that makes sense, too. Remember, I told you about Aunt Petunia shaving me bald that one time?"

"We woulda made a fine pair!" Tonks said, nodding. "The amazing, bald Ravenclaws!"

Rolling his eyes, Harry continued, "I spent all night crying about losing my hair... I was seven, after all. I can remember seeing how it had been clearly in my mind as I drifted off to sleep. Next morning, it was back, and..." Harry trailed off, seemingly running out of steam.

"And? And what?" Tonks asked, leaning forward in her chair.

"...And I remember what the 'punishment' for it was." Harry said, his eyes going blank for a moment. "Got a couple of deep scars near my right knee from that."

"Oh, Harry..." Tonks said, frowning. "Look, don't think about those awful Muggles. They aren't gonna do anything to ya again as long as me an' Mum are around."

Harry shook his head and blinked a few times to clear his head before smiling apologetically. "Yeah, sorry... guess I got kinda weird for a minute, huh?"

"Just a bit. Hate seeing you remember stuff like that." Tonks said, looking down at her feet. "No one should hafta go through that kinda thing."

"It's okay... I don't have to go back there again, anyway. Dunno why I'm so worried." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "Let's get back to work, eh?"

The afternoon lazily passed the two Ravenclaws by as they sat in the room, Tonks trying to explain how she made her hair and eyes change.

It wasn't until around suppertime that Harry began trying on his own. Saying that eyes were easier than hair, Tonks told Harry to close his and concentrate on turning them sky blue.

"Okay, you see the color in your mind? Now think o' what your eyes look like now...like when ya look into a mirror or somethin'... got it?" Tonks said, sitting at the edge of her chair as she watched Harry concentrating.

Harry offered her a nod.

"Okay, now I want you to picture seeing yourself in the mirror, only instead of green eyes you'll see blue ones..." Tonks continued.

"...Okay, got it. Looks weird, but I got it..." Harry said, quietly.

"Now, slowly open your eyes. If it worked, the transformation will happen as you open your eyelids. That's how it's been for me, anyway.

I can't just think about it and make them cycle through a rainbow of colors without blinking..." Tonks explained.

Licking his lips, Harry took a deep breath before sitting up straight and slowly opening his eyes. "Did it work?" He asked.

Tonks frowned. "Nah... but don't worry, it'll probably take a bit o' work before you get it down. Took me like two months. And I started with my hair first."

Feeling slightly dejected, Harry nodded. It wasn't a very good day for getting magical things right on the first try, apparently. But he closed his eyes and said that he was going to try again. Harry started taking long, deep breaths as he tried to focus properly.

"I might be starting too big..." Harry said after a moment. "Would trying a different *shade* of green be easier than a new color?"

"Hmm... dunno. Could be. Like I said, it was all kinda experimental for me. Sometimes things would work, sometimes they wouldn't. It's become second nature to me, so I can't really remember how it was when I first started. Sorry, Harry..." Tonks said.

"It's okay... but I think I'm going to try light green or something this time..." Harry said.

It took almost a full minute of Harry sitting perfectly still, but he finally murmured that he thought he had it. Again, he slowly opened his eyes. The room wasn't well lit, and the sinking sun outside wasn't helping matters any. The room only had one window and, though it was blocked by stacked-up tables, it did let a bit of light in. Tonks squinted, then leaned in close to Harry and grumbled, "Can't see a ruddy thing in... oh, hey, I think you did it..."

"Did I?" Harry asked.

"Come on, I can't tell in here. Let's go into the hall. Need some light if you're just gonna change the shade of green around..." Tonks said, standing up and grabbing Harry by the arm. Tugging her friend out into the corridor, Tonks wheeled around and peered at Harry once more.

"Mm... well, it looks a *bit* lighter... not very much, though." She said, leaning in closer than she had earlier to inspect his eyes. "Now try changing 'em back. That's a bit easier, since you know how your own eyes look already."

Harry nodded and shut his eyes, feeling a bit of heat in his cheeks for some reason. Taking a deep breath, he thought of how his own eyes looked when he saw them in a mirror. Though he had never thought much of himself, Harry had always liked the color of his eyes. Even when the rest of his body had been battered and bruised, nothing the Dursleys did to him could change the color of his eyes. The worse he felt, in fact, the brighter his eyes seemed to get.

"Whatcha smilin' about?" Tonks asked softly.

Opening his eyes, Harry tilted his head. "I was smiling?"

"Yeah, you were...what were ya thinkin' about?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "Uh... it was nothing... hey, are my eyes back to normal?"

Tonks stepped closer and looked Harry in the eyes again. "Mm, looks like it...they're darker than they were a minute ago. Wanna call it a night? We can spirit ourselves off an' train more whenever we get some free time...an' you can practice on your own if you want, now thatcha know the basics..."

Harry felt that heat rise in his cheeks again, so he quickly diverted his gaze from Tonks' to look off down the corridor. "Uh...s-sure. hey, are you getting hungry?"

"Actually...now that you mention it, I guess it is about time to eat again, huh?" Tonks said, turning back to their training room to close its door.

"Yeah..." Harry said quietly, trying to work out more than one confusing thing in his mind. "Um... oh, hey... when I get this all figured out...I have an interesting idea..."

"Oh yeah?"

The two began walking for the main stairway, Harry slipping his hands into his pockets. "Well, y'know how Malfoy seems to think I'm the one doing the pranks? Well, I thought we could get the twins to

make Malfoy's hair bright blue and his eyes yellow... and then WE could go in looking the same. Y'know, to throw him off the trail."

"You really think something like that would work?" Tonks asked.

"You really think Malfoy's smart enough to figure out the truth?" Harry retorted with a smile.

"Good point." Tonks said.

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The rest of the day passed without incident. Harry and Tonks eventually found Solieyu lurking about a darker corner of the common room. When asked where he had been, Solieyu had shrugged and murmured something about the hospital wing. Though he didn't look as pale as he normally did, it was obvious that the boy wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, so Harry and Tonks agreed to leave him be.

Around nine, the other students began heading for their dorms, leaving the common room with fewer and fewer people in it. Harry was stretched out on the couch by the fire, gazing into the flames with glazed eyes. Tonks was leaning over the back of it and peering curiously at him. After a few minutes of silence, it became too great and she asked, "What're you starin' at the fire like that for, eh? Looks like you've got somethin' on your mind..."

Harry blinked, turning to look at his friend. "Hm? Oh...sorry, were you saying something? I was just wondering if those two idiots are out there right now. I've already checked up in our dorm and they weren't there. I haven't seen them pass through, so that means they're out. I guess they decided that hiding somewhere until after hours would be easier than sneaking out..."

Rolling her eyes, Tonks bounced over the back of the couch, landing with a soft 'woomph!' next to Harry. Leaning her head back, she groaned, "Harry, don't worry about those two lumps. If they get in trouble, they get in trouble. You saw how hyper Terry was gettin, right? Bet he's been waitin' all day for this moment..."

"Yeah, well, I just don't want to lose two people I've only just met due to rampant stupidity." Harry grumbled, his eyes glazing over again. "Maybe I should go looking for them... bring them back..."

"Uh-uh. No way. Not a chance, Harry. I'm not gonna let you go wandering up to the off-limits area... you'd hafta get through me first." The girl grinned. "And we all know you couldn't pull that off."

Harry narrowed his eyes and raised an eyebrow, looking at Tonks again. "Are you claiming, *NYMMY*, that you could stop me from getting out of here?"

Tonks narrowed her eyes as well. "*What* did you just call me?"

"Nymmy." Harry said, smiling as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Don't...call...me...*N ymmy*!" Tonks roared, getting her feet under her and lunging at Harry suddenly.

Harry squeaked, finding himself suddenly pinned down by an irate girl. An irate girl, for that matter, who knew that he was insanely ticklish. "T-Tonks..." He began, staring up at her in horror. "No, you can't...!"

"Oh, *can't* I?" Tonks said, holding her hands up, fingers wiggling menacingly. "And whyzat?"

"I was only joking! Tonks, get those hands away from me! Tonks! *TONKS, DON'T D--*" Harry's voice grew higher and higher pitched as he spoke, being cut off as Tonks brought down her hands and started tickling the boy's sides. Harry dissolved into squeaky giggles, all the while trying to get his assailant off of him.

"Give up? Give up!" Tonks asked, grinning down at Harry, who was flailing about, helplessly. "C'mon, Harry! You can't win and you know it! Save yourself the torment!"

"N-Never!" Harry cried, defiantly.

"Never's a loooong time, O Boy Who Lived." Tonks said, doubling her efforts. Harry let out a shriek.

But, strangely enough, his wasn't the only one to fill the common room. Stopping in her assault long enough for Harry to shove her off of him and hop to a safe distance, Tonks looked up to see who else was shrieking.

"Bloody hell!" She said after her gaze went to the room's entrance. "What happened to you two! Oi, Harry, look!"

"I see them!" Harry panted as he recovered. "Kinda hard to miss, aren't they?"

Terry Boot and Gary Haskit had just burst into the common room, looking as if they had made a foul gesture at a troll. Terry's robes were partially shredded and he had several small cuts along every part of his exposed skin. Gary wasn't looking much better. His robes were also fairly tattered, though not as bad as Terry's were. He had a large cut on the right side of his face and he was shaking rather violently.

"H-Harry!" Said Terry once he had spotted the other boy. "W-we saw...!"

"It was huge!" Gary said, his voice high and quaking.

"What was?" Harry asked, walking over to the two. "You two should get to the hospital wing, you look awful..."

Terry grabbed at Harry the moment he was within arm's length, staring at him. "Dog! **BIIIIIG** dog!"

Harry could only blink in confusion. Looking over his shoulder, he said, "Oi, Tonks, you know where Flitwick's office is?"

"*NO!* Don't get Flitwick!" Gary said, crashing back into the nearest chair and rubbing his left arm. "Look, we're still... well... it was *huge*..."

"Are you two gonna stop gibbering long enough to tell us what the devil you're on about?" Tonks asked, walking over and standing next to Harry.

Terry sat down in a chair near Gary's, shuddering. "Where do we *start*?"

"How about with where you've *been* all bloody evening?" Tonks offered.

Nodding, Terry looked aside at his friend and began, "Well, the two of us hung back in an empty classroom on the fifth floor 'til after curfew... sat around talking about how we would avoid Filch an' that blasted cat of his if they showed up..."

"We snuck out after we were sure no one would see us." Gary continued. "It took awhile, but we found the spot that Professor Dumbledore warned us to keep away from..."

"And you went in anyway, didn't you?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

"No, Harry, we sliced each other up!" Terry snapped. "Yes, we went in!"

"And there was this giant dog in there..." Gary said, shivering as a cold chill went down his back.

"Soon as we got all the way into the room, these two *enormous* eyes opened up and focused on us...it was really dark in there, mind, so we didn't see a whole lot, but... blimey, we turned and bolted back for the door! Almost made it, too..." Terry said.

"Bloody thing took a few swipes at us. Guess we're lucky that we're pretty small... that thing's paws came close to scalping us!" Gary continued, looking down at the ground. "We made it out and ran the whole way down the hall... Terry reckons he saw *more* eyes..."

"More?" Harry asked, looking to Terry.

"I don't 'reckon' anything, I *did* see two more pairs of eyes in there!" Terry argued, glaring at Gary. "Musta been two more of those things in there!"

"Then you really were lucky to get out alive." Tonks said, shaking her head slowly. "You two are a bloody wreck, you know that?"

"I tried telling you two." Harry said, sighing.

"Yeah, but why the bloody hell would Dumbledore be keeping three giant dogs in the middle of the castle!" Terry asked, flailing his arms wildly.

"How did you two get in Ravenclaw, anyway?" Tonks asked, scowling. "Honestly, didn't you think there was a *reason* that Dumbledore wanted us to keep away from there?"

"Yeah, but those things coulda killed us!" Terry protested, getting to his feet. "What would've happened then!"

Tonks rolled her eyes. "They would've waited until the dogs had to use the loo, then they woulda scooped you up into a giant baggie, that's what!"

"This isn't funny!" Terry cried. "This is serious!"

"Oh, shut up." Tonks said, turning to head back to the couch. "You're givin' me a bloody headache. Go to Madam Pomfrey or go to bed. I'm tired o' listen to you whine about somethin' that coulda been avoided altogether if you'd'a used your brains..."

Terry glared at Tonks' retreating form and started after her. Harry stepped in between the two of them and stared darkly at Terry. "Leave it be." He said, quietly. "I tried to tell you it would be dangerous. What were you expecting? Unicorns and pixies?"

"Yeah, well, you don't have to worry about *me* wandering off anymore. I've learned my lesson." Gary said, finally getting back to his feet. "I'm gonna go wash up and crawl into bed."

"Wait!" Terry said, rounding on Gary. "Why aren't you helping me? They don't understand!"

"Understand *what*?" Tonks asked from her place back on the couch. "That's you're too big a prat to understand what danger means? How

did you get in here, anyway? Sorting Hat get confused or something? Obviously didn't get in here due to your *brain*."

"Take that back!" Terry growled, turning toward Tonks again.

"Oh, shut up and go to sleep." Tonks said, shaking her head. "And stop your shouting. Gonna wake up the whole of Ravenclaw at this rate."

Terry turned back toward Gary, hoping to find some backup. But Gary was just disappearing out of sight, heading for the first years' dorm. Teeth clenched, Terry stomped after him, pausing only to look over his shoulder and grit out, "You'd understand if you saw it."

"Doubtful, as I'm not stupid enough to go *looking* for trouble." Harry said simply, sitting back on the couch, next to Tonks. "Tonks is right, Terry - go to bed."

Hissing out something that sounded suspiciously like a curse word to Harry, Terry stormed out of the common room. Once he was gone, Tonks crossed her arms and grumbled, "Bloody idiot. He'd be better off in Gryffindor... or better yet, Slytherin. They're a buncha brainless idiots, too - he'd fit right in!"

"He got what he was after." Harry said, bringing up a hand to rub at his temples. "Still a bit hard to believe, though. I mean... a giant *dog*? I'd understand if it had been a giant cat. At least then, his having kittens would've made sense..."

Tonks put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "And you've got to bunk with him. You have my deepest sympathy."

"Oh, stifle it." Harry groaned, shaking his head.

"Don't wanna." Tonks replied, smirking.

"Then I'll make you." Harry growled.

"You an' what army?" Tonks asked, puffing up.

"Don't need one. I know where *you're* ticklish, too, remember?" Harry said, an evil gleam in his eyes.

Tonks stared at him for a moment before letting out a soft 'eep!' and scrambling off of the couch. Harry was on her tail in an instant, chasing the girl around the common room too many times to count. It was only after they had realized that it was nearly midnight that they called a truce.

"We're gonna be tired in the morning. You more than me if that dumb sod up there wants to 'talk' sommore..." Tonks said, still breathing heavily from the chase.

"He'd better not." Harry scowled, breathing just as hard. "I'll kick him where he wouldn't want Madam Pomfrey to see..."

"Wonder if we could send Fred and George after Terry..." Tonks idly pondered. "I'm sure they'd be all for it."

"I'm sure they would." Harry agreed, chuckling. "Modified Number Sixteen, perhaps?"

"Ooh, that's evil, Harry..."

"Yeah, well, if he's gonna walk around acting like his are bigger than everyone else's, we might as well blow 'em up to ten times their normal size. See how well he sneaks around *then*." Harry said, a dark smile forming on his face.

"Y'know what, Harry? Life would be a lot more boring if you weren't around." Tonks said, giggling and pulling a face at the same time at the mental image. "I'm off t'get my beauty sleep. G'night!"

Harry began to say the same when she bounced over, gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and ran out of the common room. Alone in the room now, Harry stared after her as she left, raising a hand up to the spot she had kissed. It wasn't the first time it had happened; she had often given him a kiss on the cheek before hopping off to bed back when he had been staying at Number Nine. But no matter how many times it happened, Harry still wasn't sure *why* it did. He had

never been around many girls before, much less girls as random and bouncy as Tonks was, at times.

Silently wondering if he would ever figure girls out, Harry turned and slowly began the trek back to his dorm room. He wasn't looking forward to finding out if Terry was still awake or not. And somewhere in the back of his mind, he couldn't help but wonder whether the two boys had been telling the truth or not. He filed the information away somewhere near where his mental notes on Solieyu were kept. Whether it was real or not, it would have to wait until morning to be properly investigated. It was, after all, nearly midnight.

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Author's Notes: And here we've planted the seed of curiosity in our ickle first year Ravenclaw's mind. Though Fluffy was originally supposed to be introduced directly, I thought it would be more in-character for Ravenclaw!Harry to go about things in a slightly less headlong manner. He'll see Fluffy for himself, of course, and go into the Forest for a detention... but those events, I'm afraid, are for a later date.

I hope nobody minded all of the little Harry/Tonks moments I stuck in. The urge to write an outright fluff scene is driving me up the ruddy wall, I'll have you lot know. It's maddening! I won't be able to do a more proper scene with them until around POA's rewrite. But you can bet I'll slip a ton of little moments in on the way TO that time!

Also, this is going to conclude Week 1! From here on out, the pace is going to pick up a bit. As it is, I've got a couple interesting ideas for Halloween dancing around in my head. I'm definitely having a costume party in the Great Hall at SOME point. Not sure whether it'll be this year or one on down the line. But it's gonna happen. Also, I hope I'm not gonna alienate the Ron-lovers out there with how he's going to act sometimes. The Troll Event is going to take place, but I'll let you lot figure out how I'm going to cover that.

Until next time, folks!

Chapter 15 – On the Hunt

To Harry Potter, who had grown up living a life a misery, time had always seemed cruel. When he was wounded, it seemed to take an eternity to get through a single day. When his uncle or cousin was mad at him, it felt as if time slowed down. And yet in Number Nine and at Hogwarts, time seemed to soar by without even bothering to look back at what had been left in its wake.

And this, perhaps, was the cruelest thing of all.

A little over two months had passed since Harry and Tonks had departed from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, though it didn't seem nearly as long to either child. After the initial week of new discoveries, meeting new people, and learning new things, a routine began to form. Harry would wake up around 5 in the morning, pondered where his friend Solieyu was, then proceeded to get dressed and walk down to the common room. Here, he would wait for Tonks to wake up - usually well over an hour and a half later, if not longer.

Few to no other students in Ravenclaw were ever up at the hour Harry was. He had run across a few of the older students asleep in the common room, slumped over massively-long sheets of parchment, but nobody was ever awake...Except for him. He spent his quiet time - the first he had ever really known - thinking about where his life had brought him. If someone had told him at the beginning of summer where he would be by October, he would have wondered what mental condition the speaker was in. But then, nobody ever talked to Harry, as he wasn't allowed out of Number Four, Privet Drive.

Looking back, it was quite a miracle that Harry even knew how to properly read and write. Though he tried to force out as many of his childhood memories as possible, the boy could never recall anyone ever teaching him. Perhaps, he thought one morning, it was simply because he was a wizard.

Harry thought of a lot of things during these quiet morning sessions in the common room, though a few kept repeating in his mind. First, there was Tonks. Every Saturday evening - sometimes Sunday

afternoon, depending on homework - was spent practising Harry's latent talent. It was harder than Harry had realized, however, and the most progress he had made thus far was to change his eyes from a brilliant emerald green to a rather sickly sea green. Tonks was always encouraging, however, and seemed more excited about the lessons than Harry did, if it were at all possible. Harry hadn't missed the way that she looked at him at times, either. She would wait with baited breath as he screwed up his face in concentration. She would peer extra close to check the color of his eyes after he made an attempt. And she never let his subpar showing get her - or him - down.

Harry couldn't really blame her enthusiasm, though. He had gone to the school's library late in September and found a few passages in various books about Metamorphmagi. He wasn't that surprised to read of just how rare they were. Only a handful seemed to show up every decade or around thereof and it seemed all but impossible to *teach* someone the skills of one. It just simply didn't work out. But Harry continued trying, as he was positive that he was slowly but surely making progress. And, for some reason that he couldn't quite place, he liked seeing Tonks' eyes light up whenever he did something new during training.

That was one of the things that kept recycling itself into Harry's mind. The other was his mysterious, quiet friend Solieyu. In the time that Harry had been at Hogwarts, he hadn't seen Solieyu go to bed OR wake up. Harry was sure that the boy had to sleep sometime and often wondered whether he did so in the hospital wing, where he seemed to spend a good portion of his time. Solieyu was a strange one, indeed. He was rather shy and very polite to almost everyone he met. He didn't seem to like the thought of physical violence, though he had once shown that he was quite good at keeping himself from being harmed.

The first week of October, Fred and George Weasley had struck yet again. This time, Draco Malfoy seemed to be unable to go anywhere unless he jumped and twirled about like a ballerina. Unfortunately, the twins couldn't have timed it any worse, as Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu (for once) were heading for the Great Hall to eat. The Ravenclaws

crossed path with the spinning, prancing Slytherin and his baffled entourage in the worst of ways. Namely, Harry's group wasn't paying attention and Malfoy had practically leapt into Solieyu's arms.

In a second stroke of foul luck, Professor Snape had just wandered up from, presumably, the dungeons. He caught sight of what was happening and had Malfoy unjinxed shortly thereafter. Stomping off to search for a certain pair of Gryffindors after that, Snape left the Entrance Hall. Of course, by this point, Malfoy was livid. And, as he had leapt into Solieyu's arms, the pale boy was the target of his rage. He had raised his wand and started to let off a bluish hex that Harry didn't recognize. Solieyu, however, had proved to be faster than he looked, leaping off to one side and landing in a crouch. The burst of blue light flew past and struck the nearest wall, which promptly sprouted a set of buttocks.

This continued on, with Solieyu dodging Malfoy's hexes and jinxes, for almost a full minute before someone in the crowd had seen fit to let Professor McGonagall know what was happening. It had been rather amusing to see her tote the blonde off by the ear. After she had, the crowd that had slowly gathered began to disperse. Solieyu dusted himself off and shook his head. Seeing the incredulous looks on his friends' faces, he had blushed and lowered his head, murmuring something about abhorring violence and needing to know how to get out of the way of things.

Neither Harry nor Tonks had pushed him on this, though they had spent time after one of their training sessions wondering about it. Tonks eventually settled that, since he seemed so weak, he needed to know how not to get hit. But Harry wasn't satisfied with this. The other boy's movement had flowed almost, if Harry had to settle on a word, gracefully. And he hadn't gotten the least bit flustered until after the one-sided duel had ended. No, something was being hidden from them. And, though he respected his friend's privacy, he wanted to get to the bottom of things.

The third and final thing that always seemed to come up when Harry was left alone with his thoughts was his fame. He still couldn't see what the big fuss was. He had found Daily Prophet clippings in some partially-hidden books in the school library about the end of the Dark

Lord's reign, but he simply couldn't grasp why everyone was so keen on him. After all, he had just been a baby at the time - it wasn't as if he had defeated Voldemort on purpose. He probably hadn't even been aware that his parents had just been murdered.

Tonks was growing to hate Harry's fame as well. It all began shortly after the second week of October had started up... Slowly, but surely, girls had started coming up to Harry to try and talk with him. A few blokes had chatted him up as well - Ron, in particular, seemed to try wheeling Harry away from everyone else so that they could talk - but the girls outnumbered the boys by at least five to one.

And it wasn't just other first years. Harry had been chewing on a final bit of apple as he and Tonks had left the Great Hall one morning when he had been approached by a sixth-year Hufflepuff girl. After a good deal of stammering, she had kissed Harry on the cheek, and thanked him for saving her Auntie Patrice, whoever that was. Harry didn't understand one bit... and Tonks had looked as if she could have mauled the Hufflepuff girl, given the chance.

It was sweet, really, to have someone else looking out for his sanity. Though Harry's wasn't entirely sure why Tonks seemed to want to keep him away from other girls, he was still thankful to have her there. If he didn't know her better, he thought that Tonks might have been a bit jealous of the other girls. He tried not to think on this for too long, however. Girls, Tonks included, were still a complete mystery to him. One, he had thought one morning, that he would probably never be able to work out.

And, though it didn't come around very often, Harry couldn't help but wonder if something was wrong with Terry Boot. Ever since the incident involving the supposed giant dogs on the third floor corridor, Terry had been acting very cold toward both Tonks and himself. Terry would speak in snipped tones with Harry and tended to only glare at Tonks. Harry had nearly shown Terry what Malfoy had gone through back in Diagon Alley one night, but Tonks had managed to stop him.

"He isn't worth it." Tonks had whispered, her arms thrown around his midsection to keep him from stomping back over to Terry. "Don't get in trouble over that git being himself..."

"He insulted you! *And* your mother!" Harry had hissed back, glaring daggers at Terry, who had backedpeddled when he saw the look in Harry's eyes.

"Us Tonks women can take care of ourselves, mate. Don't get your knickers inna twist over him. Besides, it wasn't even a creative insult. C'mon, Harry...let's go back to the corner. Show me what you found about werewolves..." Tonks had murmured into his ear.

Harry had backed down, but he had kept close watch on Terry the rest of the day, oftentimes sneaking a glance up from his book - *When We Were Werewolves - A Dark Creature's Memories of the Second World War*. Though it was quite an interesting read, Harry just hadn't been able to focus on it. Tonks kept close, trying to get Harry's mind off of things by asking him various questions about the book. To an extent, it had worked. Harry hadn't tried jinxing Terry into the afterlife when he had gone up for bed that night, anyway.

And now? Now Halloween was just slightly over a week away. Harry was growing ever more confident in his skills as a wizard, even if he was just working with beginner spells. Whenever he wasn't working on an assignment, Harry tended to wander to the school's library. In his short time at Hogwarts, he had taken to spending evenings reading over in his favorite corner of the common room. Oftentimes, Tonks would sit around and talk with him as he read, though she kept trying to pull him away for the odd game of Exploding Snap every once in awhile.

On this night - the 23rd - Harry was busy talking with Tonks about a possible Halloween prank on Malfoy. After the first week had been over, Fred and George Weasley had held off on another prank for nearly the rest of the month. Malfoy seemed to just be getting his cocky attitude back when the twins had charmed a duck's bill onto his face, making him quack quite angrily whenever he tried to speak.

Then, halfway through October, they had struck again. This time it had been at breakfast. This time, one of the blonde's own stunts had been used against him - he had sprouted an extra set of buttocks from his forehead after taking his first swig of pumpkin juice.

"I'm tellin' ya, it'd be hilarious!" Tonks said, bouncing excitedly on the arm of the chair Harry was in.

"You can't honestly *want* to look like the great git..." Harry said, shaking his head.

"Course I don't! But c'mon, Harry... think about it!"

Rolling his eyes, Harry replied, "Oh, I'm thinking about it, alright. And, quite frankly, it frightens me."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Tonks asked, pouting slightly.

"My sense of adventure probably got sucked out of me when I asked not to be stuck in either Slytherin or Gryffindor." Harry said, dryly. "Look, it's not that it wouldn't be amusing... I'm just worried about what they might try to *do* to you."

"Aw, don't worry. I can take care o' myself, Harry." Tonks said, nodding firmly.

"Yes, well, that's a given." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "But even so... Crabbe and Goyle aren't exactly scrawny. I don't doubt that you could waffle Malfoy upside the head, but those two...? I dunno, Tonks."

"You an' Leon could hang back and watch! If anything goes wrong, you both can rush in and play the hero." Tonks said, nudging Harry with her shoulder. "C'mon, it'll be great! Especially if we can get the twins to keep the bloody ponce out of the Great Hall for awhile..."

With a sigh, Harry shook his head. "Alright, alright... I can tell that I'm not going to win this argument. I know when I'm beat."

Tonks let out a victorious whoop, squeezing Harry tightly before hopping off of the chair's arm. "Great! I'm gonna go practice for a bit - I'll see ya later, alright?"

Harry rolled his eyes again, waving her off. The girl rushed off to her dorm just as Solieyu was walking up. "What was that all about?" He asked when he was near Harry.

"Oh, she wants to try impersonating Malfoy for Halloween." Harry explained. "Y'know, to further the pranks where Malfoy's been proclaiming his infinite love for his henchmen."

Solieyu frowned in thought, then let out a shudder. "She wants to make them think that Malfoy'd let himself be turned into a girl just to go out with them?"

"Something like that. She would've done it anyway, even if I hadn't agreed on it. She's quite stubborn when she wants to be..."

"Indeed."

"So, where've you been today, eh? Haven't seen you around."

Solieyu flopped back into a nearby chair, stretching out before saying, "Well, first I was up in the Hospital Wing, getting a potion to help me sleep tonight. Then I decided to see why there was a crowd forming down at the lake... apparently, the giant squid was trying to do launch out of the water and do a backflip or something. Then I almost got waylaid by everyone's favorite Slytherin... managed to avoid him, though it took me out of my way..."

"Busy day." Harry commented, raising an eyebrow.

"Quite."

"So, planning to come hang out with us on Halloween?" Harry asked, looking around for a book to bury his nose in.

"I don't see why not." Solieyu replied, smiling. "I've nothing better to do..."

"Excellent! I suppose we need to work over a plan of rescue, though, in case Tonks' idea flops. Any suggestions?"

"Mm, I'm not sure. I assume that Malfoy will be getting detained somewhere while she does this?"

"That's the plan." Harry said, shrugging. "She's going to go ask the twins if they can intercept him... though why she thinks that he and his goon squad will be seperated to begin with is anyone's guess."

"We could always try food to settle them down. I've never seen them decline sweets, after all..." Solieyu offered.

"Hm... true. I suppose we could do that to start things off... try and calm them down before they get really riled up. I'm just glad we know some basic stunning spells now... might come in handy some day."

"Indeed. Well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go turn in early. Maybe I'll be able to sleep through the night for once." Solieyu said, smiling wearily. The boy stood up, nodded once to Harry, then turned and walked off for the stairs.

"Maybe." Harry murmured to himself, watching his friend go. "Doubtful, but maybe."

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Unbeknownst to anyone, Harry had been feigning sleep until past midnight for the past two weeks. The reason being that he was tired of Solieyu not telling he and Tonks what was wrong with him. His mind simply wouldn't *let* him go to sleep until after the other boy had slipped out of the room. Harry had been keeping a sheet of parchment under his covers and wrote down when Solieyu had been sneaking out of the dorm.

It was always after midnight and before one in the morning.

Of course, Tonks had found the parchment a week after Harry started doing this. She often rummaged in his bag for a spare quill, usually because she wasn't very quick in the mornings and forgot to pack properly. She had bugged him the rest of the day until he had given in, tugged her aside, and whispered his plan to her.

Two days after their discussion on Tonks' Halloween prank, it had been decided - they would follow Solieyu out of the Tower as quietly as possible. Harry had immediately rushed to the library and looked for any books that might be useful in stealthily following someone. He

had found something almost at once, though the instructions seemed too far above his head.

But that hadn't been much trouble, either. He had simply gone up to one of the older girls that he had seen smiling at him from time to time and asked her. Harry, Tonks had said after witnessing the event, could be very conniving at times. He had practiced up in his dorm for the remainder of the day until he felt comfortable enough with using it.

Right on track, Solieyu sat bolt upright in bed. His gaze went around to the other four boys in the room. If nothing else, Harry had gotten quite good at merely *looking* as if he were asleep. Moments later, Solieyu slipped out of bed, padding over to the window in the room and gazing out. He stood there for just a few seconds before frowning and returning to his bed, opening his trunk and getting dressed as quietly as he could.

Solieyu tiptoed across the room. The only noises came from the deep breathing of three boys and the loud snoring of the fourth. Timing his moves with the snores, Solieyu was able to open the door and slip out without making a sound.

Harry, still dressed in his robes, slipped out a moment later. He drew his wand and aimed at his shoes, performing the silencing spell that he had picked up. After a brief test, Harry rushed over to the door and, doing as Solieyu had, slipped out quietly.

Checking to make sure Solieyu wasn't still around, Harry carefully made his way down to the common room. Just inside the stairway that led to the girls' dorms, a voice squeaked, "Harry?"

"Yeah, I'm here... Leon pass by?" Harry asked quietly, looking around the room again to make sure.

Tonks, also fully dressed, hopped into the room to stand next to Harry. "Yeah, 'bout a minute before you did. You really think he's goin' to the hospital wing at this hour?"

"Probably. I just want to make sure. It'd make me feel a bit better. I dunno, Tonks... it seems like something's seriously odd here. I just can't place my finger on it..."

"And it's drivin' ya crazy?"

"Exactly. Here, let me cast the silencing charm on you..."

Harry pointed his wand at Tonks' feet this time, spinning his wand for a split second before giving it a jab and murmuring the incantation. A little sparkle of dull, grey light shot out and hit Tonks' shoes. She bounced a few times to make sure it was working properly. "Good job, Harry. Now then, shall we?"

"Yes, let's." Harry nodded. The two ran across the room and through the path that led to the back of Walter's portrait. When they reached it, Tonks called out in a forced whisper, "Oi! Oi, Walt! You still up?"

A startled snort came a moment later, followed by the old wizard coughing. Once he composed himself, he murmured, "Indeed I am..."

"We wanna get out!" Tonks said quickly.

"Oh? And why is that?" Walter asked. "Students aren't normally allowed out at this hour."

"Harry's feelin' sick!" Tonks said, shooting Harry a grin. Taking this as a cue, Harry let out a pitiful groan.

"C'mon, Walt..." Tonks pleaded. "You don't want him to spew over the back o' your portrait, do ya? Think of the smell!"

"Oh, good heavens!" Walter said, spluttering. "Are you *sure* he's that ill?"

"Nnn...Tonks, make him hurry up! That chicken I had for dinner wants to come back up for another go!" Harry moaned, putting a hand to his forehead and striking a melodramatic pose.

"Oh, alright, alright! Just go straight up to Madam Pomfrey, do you hear?" Walter's voice said as his portrait swung open.

"Wouldn't have it any other way." Tonks murmured. Putting an arm around Harry's shoulders, Tonks made the effort of helping the act on. She helped Harry walk along, the two pausing every few seconds as

Harry puffed up his cheeks briefly, then made a show at swallowing very hard.

Once they were out of the old wizard portrait's sight, however, they took off in a dead run. "Damn it." Tonks cursed. "He held us up longer than I thought he would! We may never find Leon now!"

"Oh, we'll find him." Harry said, determination in his voice. "If it takes me the rest of the night, I'll find him."

But it didn't take the rest of the night. In fact, it only took until they had reached the Entrance Hall. Rushing to stare up the center of the spiral staircase, they saw Solieyu two floors above them, moving at a rather leisurely pace.

"He should be a lot further on than that..." Harry said, brows coming together. "Why's he moving so slowly?"

"Maybe he really *is* tired an' just can't get to sleep... I was laid up for about a week once with some disease I could never say right. Made me all groggy, but it gave me insomnia at the same time... I walked around in a bit of a daze..."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't in a daze when he left." Harry said, watching his friend ascend the stairs. "You know, he's done strange things off and on when he's gotten up..."

"Whatcha mean?" Tonks asked as the two began to slowly creep up the main staircase as well.

"Well... last Tuesday when he got up, he was reaching around in his trunk for his clothes or something, and all of a sudden, his hand jerked back as if it had touched something hot. Tonight he went to look out the window for a bit... had a bit of a strange look on his face, too..." Harry explained, casting the odd glance up to make sure that Solieyu was still on the move.

"Weird... wonder what was in his trunk..." Tonks pondered aloud.

"Dunno... was too dark and I wasn't in a good position to see, anyway." Harry said.

Suddenly, Tonks stopped moving. Harry was a few steps ahead of her, lost in thought, before he realized that she wasn't next to him anymore. Turning around, he saw that she was staring at something just behind him, mouth open in horror.

Wincing, and quite sure that their friend had backtracked and was behind him, Harry slowly turned. But nothing was there. Then, from the ground, a soft growl came. Looking down, Harry saw what Tonks had looked so spooked about.

"Mrs. Norris! Crap, run!" Harry hissed, spinning around and running back down the stairs he had just climbed up. Tonks unfroze a moment later and joined him. Right when they hit the third floor landing, Mrs. Norris let out the loudest cry that either of the two had ever heard.

"Bloody hell, how'd Leon get past him?" Tonks growled. "He *had* to've passed by her!"

"Forget Mrs. Norris, we almost figured it out! It was one floor above us and that bloody cat stymied us!"

"Stymied!" Tonks said, incredulously. "Stop using words I don't know!"

"Sorry. Oh, hell, listen!"

The two kept running, their footfalls making no noise whatsoever. This allowed them to hear the noise of someone chasing after them even clearer.

"Door ahead!" Harry hissed, pointing. "Inside!"

But when they reached the door, it was locked. Swearing under her breath, Tonks fumbled around in her robes, grabbing her wand. Quickly growling, "Alohamora!" the lock popped open. She and Harry flung the door open and slipped inside, shutting it as quickly and quietly as they could manage.

The room was dark - frighteningly so, almost. There were no windows, there were no torches. Nothing lit up the room and, though they had

been running around the castle at night, things were still illuminated somewhat. But not in this place. Outside, Argus Filch followed his cat up to the door that Harry and Tonks were pressed up against from the other side.

"You sure 'bout that?" Filch grumbled. "That's the second pair in as many months... can't be in there, Norrie, you know that. We'd be missin' the other two if that's what happened last time... last I checked, we still had all the grubbly little brats..."

Mrs. Norris pawed at the door, letting out an annoyed 'meow.'

"I think we should take y'to Poppy...see if *she* knows what's wrong with your nose..." Filch scowled. "C'mon, I ain't got time to be standing here... I didn't hear anyone running from us, anyway..."

Slowly, ever so slowly, the caretaker's footsteps grew softer and softer. Harry's head slipped back, making contact with the door and making a quiet 'thunk!' noise as it did so. "Safe." He whispered. "Where are you?"

"Right next t'ya, you silly sod." Tonks grumbled. "Why's this room so bloody dark, anyway? Here, hang on... Lumos!"

Bright light encompassed the tip of Tonks' wand. She smiled at Harry, but Harry wasn't smiling back. Instead, he was staring off toward the other side of the room, gaping like a goldfish. Frowning, Tonks stepped closer and whispered, "Oi, what's wrong?"

"He was right..." Harry gasped out, his eyes growing as wide as saucers. "The idiot was right!"

"Who was--" But Tonks turned her head to follow Harry's gaze. And she, too, saw what 'he' - whoever that was - had been right about.

Staring back at them from the other side of the room - which wasn't very far away - was the large and angry-looking head of a dog almost as dark as the room itself had been. Patting around on the door behind him, looking for the handle to get out, Harry whispered, "I can't believe that idiot was right... handle, Tonks! Help me!"

"R-right!" Tonks said, slowly reaching back for the door and feeling around.

But then, slowly, another big, black head rose up from the darkness that lingered. Shortly thereafter, a third rose up. And that's when Harry and Tonks saw what was *really* in the room. It wasn't one big dog. It wasn't three big dogs. No... it was one big dog with three heads. Three heads that looked very, very mad at having their sleep disturbed.

"Tonks... Run." Harry said. He grabbed her by the arm with one hand, yanking her to his other side as he threw the door open with his other hand. The three-headed dog charged as he did this, barking up a storm. Harry and Tonks barely got out before it reached them. It had been so close, Harry had felt the thing's breath hit the back of his neck.

Quickly spinning, Harry relocked the door and slumped down to the ground, a hand over his heart. Next to him, Tonks was doing much the same.

"Let's be thankful Filch didn't lock it back up..." Harry said, the fear in his voice evident. "We would have never survived..."

"We almost didn't anyway..." Tonks said quietly. "...We can't let Terry know that we've seen... he'd never let us live it down..."

"Yeah... Hey, are you alright? Sorry for grabbing and pulling you so hard..."

"No, no, I'm fine, just... just a bit..."

"Yeah, me too." Harry said, shutting his eyes and letting his head rest against the stone wall.

"Filch is way too fast for an old man." Tonks murmured.

Harry nodded, then sighed. "We need to get back to the Tower... and, luck and fate willing, we won't meet those two again."

"Or Leon."

"Or Leon." Harry agreed. *that* would be rather hard to explain.

"Mission failed?" Tonks asked, getting back to her feet and holding a hand down toward Harry.

"Mission failed." Harry agreed again, taking the hand and getting back up, as well. As they made their way back toward Ravenclaw Tower,

Harry cast aside a smile to his friend. Tonks frowned. "What've you got to smile about, eh? You just nearly got eaten by a huge dog with three heads!"

"Exactly. I won't have to act like I feel sick when we get back. I'm sure I'll still look the part..." Harry said. "It feels like I've got two adam's apples still..."

Tonks simply rolled her eyes. "The question is... *WHY* was there a big, three-headed dog in there? What's the bloody purpose of having something that could *kill* you in a school!"

"I'll add it to all of the other questions I can't figure out." Harry said, darkly. "This is more than I was ready to handle... I just wanted to figure out whether or not Leon *really* has insomnia and nightmares..."

"We'll both be having plenty for him and the rest of the whole Tower at this rate." Tonks scowled.

"Nightmares or not, I just want to crawl back into my bed right now. I doubt I'll sleep, but..."

"Safety."

"Yeah..."

"So... rule number one, we don't tell anyone what happened. Rule number two, we definitely don't tell Leon we were trailing him. And number three... we never, *ever*, go back into that room." Tonks said.

"Agreed."

"Right, Walt's just up ahead. Hunch over a bit there, Harry. Might as well make this believable again.

And with that, Harry and Tonks slipped back into Ravenclaw Tower, given only a slightly unreadable look by the portrait guarding the entrance. It was going to be a long night for both of them.

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Author's Notes: And there's your delayed Chapter 15! Blame Nintendo and Game Freak for releasing another Pokemon game right in the middle of First Year! It was all their fault, I tells ya! ... Well, okay, them and a bit of writer's block. But once I sat down and ran over what I wanted to happen, things seemed a bit clearer to me. So now I go to rest my eyes and my hands. Stupid videogames, making my arms ache.

I hope no one minds me jumping ahead a month and a half or so. After the first week, I felt the schedule was fleshed out enough that it didn't need anymore exposition. And besides, I wanted them to see Fluffy, I wanted them to chase Leon, and I wanted to set up Halloween.

Now Halloween shouldn't take over a week to get out because I've got EXACTLY what I want to happen in some notes I made. The speculation on Leon continues, it seems. Does he merely have insomnia? Is he something more? Am I leading you all along only to point and giggle in your faces when I reveal the truth? Look INTO THE FUTURE to see!

... Um... Right, nevermind.

Anyway, you should all know what's coming. We've got a Troll loose in the castle. But things are just a bit different this time around. This is no slow-moving beast out wandering... this thing is severely ticked off... But why? Well, you'll just have to come back and check that out for yourselves, now won't you?

Chapter 16 – Halloween

"Are you ever *not* reading?"

Harry looked up from the book he was scanning over to see an annoyed Tonks looking down at him.

"It's interesting." He said with a half-hearted shrug. "I didn't grow up with any books of my own, understand... I like having quiet time to think and read. It's...nice."

Tonks flopped down on the arm of his chair in the corner. "Yeah, but even so. Whenever you aren't in class or doing work, it seems like you're always stuck here in your chair and reading." She said, peering down at the book. "What *are* you reading, anyway?"

"Something on invisibility charms. After our... uh... little failed tracking attempt, I thought I'd see if there was a better way to keep ourselves concealed. Trouble is, all of these are ridiculously complicated spells. Even with someone showing me how to do them, I doubt I could. Here, look at this one... look at how much is involved with it!" Harry said, flipping the book open and pointing to a lengthy paragraph and accompanying photograph. In it, a wizard was doing all sorts of complicated wand moves.

"I'd rather not have a repeat of what happened, you know... I say we give Leon the benefit of the doubt." Tonks said, scowling at the memory. "I'm not tagging along for anymore late night romps through the castle, that's for sure."

"Spoilsport." Harry murmured.

"We're lucky we didn't get eaten alive!" Tonks hissed into Harry's ear. Harry shivered.

"Yeah, but still... How *did* he get by that cat, Tonks? Surely she was there when he walked by...there's no way she couldn't have been." Harry said after composing himself. "How'd he *do* that?"

"Dunno, mate." Tonks said, sitting back up properly and shaking her head. "S'one o' life's great mysteries."

"Indeed." Harry replied, dryly. "So, still planning on making yourself look like Malfoy for the party tonight?"

"Yup!" Tonks said, smiling happily. "I've got it all down perfect."

"Can I see?"

"Ah-ah-ah... not until tonight, Mr. Potter." Tonks said, wagging a finger back and forth in front of Harry's face.

"Aww, but why?"

"Call it revenge for the other night." Tonks said, giving Harry the evil eye before grinning.

"Alright, alright, I get it. We shouldn't have done that. Don't bite my head off..." Harry grumbled. "I take it you're bored."

"What makes you think that?"

"You always come hop on the arm of the chair when you're bored. When you aren't, you just lean over." Harry said.

"I do?" Tonks asked, blinking.

"You never noticed?"

"No... but you nailed it in one. I've got my 'disguise' for the party all ready, it's still a few hours away, and I've got nothing at all to do." Tonks said, crossing her arms.

"You could always read." Harry said, cocking an eyebrow and looking up at her. "Here, look at this one."

Harry reached down beside the chair and, from a small stack that was there, pulled a thin book on being stealthy. "It's got some interesting stuff in it." Harry said, holding it out. "Maybe you'll notice something I didn't."

Tonks took the book - So You Want to be a Stalker - and flipped it open, her eyes scanning the contents briefly. "I dunno. Seems like such a waste of free time..."

"It isn't a waste... come on, give it a shot. For me?" Harry looked back up at her and, mimicking something he had seen her do more than once, batted his eyelashes. Tonks snickered and swatted him on the arm.

"Alright, alright, stop that, it's creepy!" Tonks laughed, shaking her head. "Oi, remind me not to do that around you anymore..."

"Noted."

For the next two hours, the two sat and read in relative silence. Relative because every so often, Tonks would murmur something she had just read and how it could help. Harry shot down most of them, saying that he had already thought it over. When Tonks had finished with the first book, Harry had tossed her a second - this one on rare and exotic creatures of the wizarding world. Tonks seemed much more interested in this book than she had with the previous one.

When she realized how late it was getting, Tonks squeaked and hopped off the chair's arm. "I have to go and get ready! Watch for me, Harry, alright? And let the twins know what I'm upto so they don't accidentally hex *me* into next week, alright?"

"Alright...Good luck, I suppose." Harry said, watching Tonks bounce off through the arched pathway leading out of the Tower. Harry shook his head and lost himself in the book he had been reading most of the afternoon.

It wasn't until someone cleared their throat that he looked up again. An older student - a girl, no less - was smiling at him. He blinked. "Um... h-hello..." He offered, feeling highly annoyed with himself for the return of his stutter.

"Hello..." The girl said, quietly. "The Halloween party's going to be starting any minute... your eyes were a bit glazed over, so I thought I'd come over and...well..."

Harry looked around. The common room had, at some point, been emptied. It was now only himself and the girl there. Though she looked to be at least two years older than him, she still seemed quite shy around him. Fame, Harry thought, was very annoying.

"Uh, sure, thanks..." Harry muttered, marking his place in the book and setting it down on the seat as he stood. "Well, um... I guess I'll be going now..."

"Me too... would you like to walk down together...?" The girl asked, staring down at her feet and blushing brightly.

Harry winced. Why couldn't more girls be like *Tonks*? Normal and easy to talk to? Why'd ninety percent of the school's female population have to be so shy and giggly? Shaking it off, he opened his mouth, paused a moment, then said, "Ahh... well, I would, but I was supposed to meet a friend of mine. Actually, I should've already left, but I got wrapped up in my book, so..."

"Oh... well, that's alright." The girl said, looking dejected for a split second. "Have fun..."

"You too..." Harry said, watching as the girl walked through the pathway out of the Tower. Harry waited for a minute, then followed.

"Last one out tonight?" Harry asked the portrait of Walter as he left the Tower.

"Indeed you are." Walter said. "I wish I had a portrait down in the Great Hall. If Halloween parties are anything like they were back in my day, I'd say you were in for quite a treat."

"I've been looking forward to it all month." Harry said. "But I'd better be going. I've had my nose in a book all day and I'm afraid I lost track of time..."

"Ahh, the same thing happens to me all the time. Or, should I say, it used to. Have a good time tonight!" Walter said, waving Harry on. Harry nodded and took off in a run.

Conveniently enough, Harry ran into Solieyu just as he had walked into the Entrance Hall. Unsurprisingly, the pale boy was coming downstairs. Harry assumed it was from the Hospital Wing. The two boys talked for a few moments - mostly about where Tonks was - before something from below made them pause.

Near the Great Hall's entrance, Ron Weasley was yelling at a girl with very bushy hair, who seemed to be shaking slightly. Harry couldn't quite make out what Ron was saying, but it seemed to be upsetting the girl a great deal, as she took off running a moment later. She seemed to be crying.

"That wasn't nice." Solieyu said quietly as he and Harry began to make their way across the room.

"You heard them?" Harry asked.

"Mm." Was all his friend replied with.

Ron watched the girl retreating until he caught sight of Harry out of the corner of his eyes. At once, his demeanor seemed to change. While he had been red in the face moments before, he now grinned as he waved the two boys over. Well... he waved Harry over. Ron didn't even bother saying hello to Solieyu.

"Hey, Harry! I was wondering if you were coming..." Ron said.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked, eyeing Ron.

"What? Oh, with her?" Ron said the last word as if it were something despicable.

"Who is she?"

"Hermione Granger. A real know-it-all." Ron said, making a face.

"That doesn't tell me what you said to her to send her off like that!" Harry said. "It isn't nice to make girls cry, you know."

"She hardly qualifies. She'd be a book if she were allowed. She spends all her time in the library, working on assignments, and reading.

Then she goes and bosses other people around, telling *them* what to do!" Ron scoffed.

"And what, exactly, is wrong with the library? Or reading alot? I'm late because I've spent the better part of the day with my nose in a book." Harry said, crossing his arms.

"Oh... uh... well, I guess nothing's wrong with it." Ron said, trying to double back. "But you should see how she acts!"

"You told her that she was smarmy, bossy, and would do well with trying to make friends with her books she she would never have any *real* friends." Solieyu's quiet voice chimed in.

Harry looked at Solieyu strangely for a moment before looking back to Ron and murmuring, "I don't like people who insult others for being themselves."

"Malfoy acts like himself and you hate him." Ron countered.

"I hate Malfoy because he's a ponce, he insulted my friends, and he acted like he was better than everyone else. And you seem to be aiming to try beating him on that last point. Do the rest of you feel the same way?" Harry said, looking around at four other boys standing near Ron. One of them was Neville Longbottom, the boy whose Remembrall Harry had saved from Malfoy. One of the others was Dean Thomas, who he had met on the train.

"Well, she *is* pretty snitty about homework." Said the boy Harry didn't know yet. "You don't see 'er. She's a right menace when she wants t'be."

"That gives you the right to talk down to her like that? Dean, don't tell me you feel the same way?" And, though he hadn't spoken to Neville aside from a brief moment where he had returned the Remembrall, Harry posed the same question to Neville.

Dean and Neville exchanged a glance, looked at Ron, looked at Harry, then shrugged.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I suggest apologizing." He said, voice low. "And, for the record, people who make complete arses of themselves could do well to keep away from me. Come on, Leon. Let's get away from this lot before I feel like giving up on this party entirely!" Then, as

he and his friend were entering the Great Hall, Harry added, "If this is how all Gryffindors act, I'm glad I asked the Sorting Hat not to place me there."

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The Great Hall looked positively spooky. The staff had gone to great lengths to make the place look appropriate for the occasion. Though hundreds of tiny candles floated overhead, the light they gave off was minimal. The four house tables were pushed to the sides of the room. Despite this, they were lined with various snacks and drinks, all decorated and themed after the holiday in question.

Once they had escaped from the quartet of Gryffindor boys, Solieyu had wheeled Harry over to one of the tables and made him down a few gulps of pumpkin juice to help compose himself.

"Thanks." Harry said, sighing and running a hand back through his messy hair. "I have a thing against people being picked on..."

"So I saw." Solieyu said, leaning back against the table and grabbing an apple in the shape of a skull. He gazed at it for a moment before taking a tentative nibble. "Shouldn't Tonks be here somewhere?"

"If she is, it'd be hard to tell. If we spot two Malfoys, though..." Harry began, then frowned. "Hey, Leon, how'd you hear what Ron said about that girl, anyway? I couldn't make out a thing."

"Exceptionally good hearing." Solieyu said, shrugging.

Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing further. Instead, the two wandered the Great Hall, stopping to talk to several people they knew as they did. All the while, they looked for Tonks and Malfoy. They saw neither. But then, eventually, the Slytherin and his muscle squad entered, looking all the world as if they'd rather not even be there. Moments later, Professor Snape strode in, looking similarly put out.

"I wonder if Snape teaches Malfoy how to scowl..." Harry said under his breath. "Oi, where IS she? Oh, there's one of her friends - I think her name's Amelia...come on..."

Walking over to a first year Hufflepuff girl, Harry asked, "Amelia? Um, you haven't seen Tonks, have you? She was supposed to have been here by now..."

Amelia blinked, looking away from a conversation with a few of her friends as Harry spoke. "I saw her talking to Fred and George Weasley over by the entrance to the dungeons before I came in... dunno what happened after that, though..."

"Thanks..." Harry said, moving away and frowning. Solieyu caught up quickly.

"Should we go try and find the school's resident pranksters?" Solieyu asked.

"Couldn't hurt..."

But before they could find the twins, the twins found them. Surprising both Ravenclaw boys by sneaking up on them, Fred and George grinned at the jump they received.

"Don't *DO* that!" Harry said, a hand on his chest.

"Aww, did we scared you?" Fred asked.

"We didn't mean to." Said George.

"We merely wanted--"

"--to see if you lot--"

"--had seen Miss Tonks."

Harry and Solieyu shook their heads.

"We were going to look for you, actually. One of her friends said that you two were talking with her earlier..." Harry said.

The twins exchanged slightly confused looks. "She hasn't shown up yet? That's odd." Said Fred.

"She was just asking us to waylay Malfoy as long as we could. Couldn't do too much, though. Not with that greasy lump Snape tagging along with them." George said, looking to the staff table and scowling.

"Well where did she say she was going?" Harry asked.

Fred opened his mouth to respond when the doors to the Great Hall once more opened - this time quickly, slamming into the walls from the force used. Stuttering Professor Quirrell came charging into the Great Hall, screaming.

Dumbledore was sweeping across the room in an instant, meeting the shaking Defense Professor halfway. "Calm yourself, Quirinus. Now, what is the problem?"

"Troll!" Quirrell said in a high-pitched whimper. "There's a t-troll in the d-d-dungeons! I-I saw it as I w-was coming up!"

The reaction was immediate. Several students shrieked, several dropped what they were eating or drinking, and several just stared at the cowardly professor in shock. Dumbledore reacted just as quickly, however, raising his voice only slightly and saying, "That is enough! Prefects, escort students from your houses back to your common rooms."

The headmaster turned and looked back up to the staff table. "Minerva, Severus, come with me. Quirinus, if you would be so kind as to show us where you saw the troll?"

Quirrell looked completely horrified at the thought, but nodded and led the other professors out of the room. The remaining professors began helping the prefects round up students.

"This isn't good." Said one of the twins suddenly.

Harry looked back at them. "What do you mean?"

"Well... we were heading down *into* the dungeons." Said Fred.

"We would stop Malfoy long enough for Tonks to change and take his place." Said George.

"But after Snape showed up, we had to abort the plan." Said Fred.

"We tried knowing on the door to the empty classroom she was using..." Said George, frowning. "She just told us that she'd be up in a few minutes...something about her hair getting stuck."

Harry and Solieyu exchanged a glance. "You guys don't think..." Harry began slowly.

"This won't end well." Said Fred. "Right, we're coming with you."

"No!" Said Harry quickly. "It'll be easier if it was just me and Leon that snuck off. *Four* students rushing off into the dungeons would be a bit too obvious. Especially four from different houses. You two cover us and distract anyone who looks that way, alright?"

The twins looked wary, but nodded as one of the Gryffindor prefects, a boy with hair as red as the twins', called out to them. The twins made a face.

"Our brother the prefect." George said, walking off with Fred and shaking his head. "We'll never hear the end of it. Right, come on, you two."

"Don't go getting yourselves killed." Fred said, smiling pleasantly.

"Yeah, we wouldn't be able to get more advice for Malfoy pranks!" Said George, nodding solemnly.

"Nice to know you care." Harry said in a monotone.

As the students were ushered into the Entrance Hall, Harry and Solieyu locked eyes with the twins. As the Ravenclaws made the rush for the dungeons, a loud explosion echoed from the main stairway, making half the students present jump, half of them scream.

"I'm really going to owe those two." Harry said, panting as he and Solieyu closed the door behind them. "Come on, Leon... she's gotta be down here somewhere."

Solieyu was making a face. "I hate the smell down here..."

Harry sniffed. The dungeons always smelled rather dank and musty. But there was another stink in the air tonight. Something decidedly foul. "I hope it isn't anywhere nearby." Harry said in a whisper.

"We should have asked *which* empty classroom she was in." Solieyu said, his voice also low. "I don't hear anything stomping around, though... nor do I hear the professors..."

For at least five minutes the two boys walked as quickly as they dared to move through the dungeons. Then Harry groaned. "What are we *doing*? Here, stand still..."

"What? Harry, what are you d--"

Harry had whipped his wand out and went through the motions of casting the silencing charm he had found. "There. Now we can move faster and not have to worry about being heard."

"This isn't the first time you've cast that, is it?" Solieyu said.

"Don't have any idea what you mean. Come on, Tonks could be in trouble." Harry said, rushing off down the dark, stone corridor.

"I'd be more worried about the troll, quite frankly." Solieyu said, taking off after his friend.

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"We aren't doing very well at this tonight!" Harry yelled, tearing around a corner. Just behind him, Solieyu came rushing as well. And then, a moment later, a huge, lumbering creature charged around the bend. They had gone searching for Tonks... but wound up finding the troll instead - and it was very, very angry.

For a few seconds, Harry and Solieyu had stood, gaping at the troll, who was slamming itself into a wall and cracking the stones. With a pained howl, the troll turned to face them. When it had, it made the situation quite clear - something had ripped out one of the troll's eyes. Bloody was gushing heavily from the wound and the troll couldn't seem to do anything about it.

Being the only two people in its sight, the troll had charged at them in a half-blind rage.

"At least it isn't as fast as we are!" Solieyu said quickly as he caught up with Harry.

"Maybe not, but we'll tire before IT does!" Harry said back. "It was in that book of magical creatures I checked out of the library! Trolls have a *lot* of stamina!"

"Wonderful." Solieyu growled. "Harry, look! Just up ahead!"

There was a door halfway down the corridor they were running through. They rushed at it, threw it open, and slipped in quickly, slamming it shut and praying the troll didn't notice where they had gone.

"Oi, what're you two doin' here! This is a girl's toilet!" Came an all-too-familiar voice from across the room.

Harry and Solieyu stared at each other in a moment of horror before they turned their gazes onto one Nymphadora Tonks, who looked all the world like Draco Malfoy at the moment. The voice and her mannerisms were all that told them who she really was.

"**SHHH!**" The boys hissed in unison, causing Tonks to blink and walk toward them.

"What? Snape chasin' after ya? He won't come in here!" Tonks said, grinning.

A roar from outside the room wiped the grin off the girl's face.

"Damn!" Harry swore. "Leon, Tonks, we have to get out of here! We're sitting ducks in this bathroom!"

"What the bloody hell *was* that?" Tonks asked, eyes wide.

"Troll. Some twit let one in and apparently sliced out its eye. It caught sight of us and...well..." Harry explained quickly.

"It's at the end of the corridor. If we fling the door open and rush out right now, we can make a break for the northern end of the hall!" Solieyu said, leaning forward against the door.

"How do you know where it is...?" Harry asked slowly.

"Never you mind. Come on, we have to go! On three... ready?"

They counted down together, getting in position to burst out of the room when they reached zero. When it was reached, Solieyu yanked the door open hard and Harry rushed from inside, Tonks close behind him. Solieyu ran out last, pausing only long enough to look back down the hallway. The troll was just turning to investigate the loud '*bang*' that the door had made.

"It sees us!" Solieyu shouted, hurrying to catch up to his friends.

"What were you *doing* here?" Harry called to Tonks as the three ran. "Why the hell down here in the dungeons?"

"It was easier than tugging Malfoy up to the owlery, I dunno! It seemed like a good idea at the time!" Tonks scowled. "Besides, who knew a *TROLL*, of all things, would be let into the school!"

"But still! That was a really dumb thing to do! What if a pack of Slytherin girls had found you!" Harry yelled, skidding around a corner in what he thought was the way back out of the dungeons.

Following his lead, Tonks yelled back, "Then they would have probably tried kissing me, since I looked like the royal ponce! ... What the hell was I *doing* there?"

"If you two would stop bickering like an old married couple," Solieyu said, a twinge of annoyance in his voice, "We need to take the next right, then a left, then another left. That's the way back to the Entrance Hall!"

"How the hell do you *know* these things?" Tonks asked, gazing over at Solieyu.

"Forget about that!" Harry said, looking over his shoulder. "Where'd the troll get off to?"

Tonks and Solieyu both looked over their shoulders. Slowly, the trio came to a halt. There was nothing but an eerie silence filling the air around them.

"How do you lose track of a one-eyed troll!" Hissed Tonks, looking back and forth along the corridor.

"By not paying attention. Trolls aren't exactly bright, but they know how to fight. And to survive, they need to at least know basic strategies for catching their prey..." Harry said, quietly.

"You read too much." Tonks growled. "I don't suppose you know of a way to *stop* a troll, do you?"

"Not a clue."

"Lovely."

"Shh! Damn, it's gone around and blocked our only way out... we can't take that route now..." Solieyu said, narrowing his eyes. "Unless..."

Tonks and Harry exchanged a quick glance. It was quite unlike the normally-collected Solieyu to swear. The two looked back at him and Harry decided to ask.

"Unless what?"

"Unless... we can find a way to trip it up or something while we run by."

"Why don't we blow up its club or something?" Tonks suggested. "Can't crush our heads as easily if it doesn't have that thing!"

"Well if *you* know explosive spells and you're not informing us, I'd love to know why." Harry said, grumpily.

"Why don't we try levitating it over his head?" Solieyu suggested. "We *do* know the Wingardium Leviosa spell, do we not?"

"Brilliant idea!" Tonks said, nodding. "But don't think I'm gonna let you off the hook. There's no way you could tell where the troll is from here!"

Solieyu smirked slightly, though he wore a grim expression on the rest of his face. "Not all magic comes from the wand. Now come on, if we're to do this, we need to get moving."

The other two nodded and, as one, they began running again. "It's just up ahead! Harry, I'll lift its club, you get Tonks to the other side. I can get out of its way better than either of you could!"

"Works for me!" Tonks said.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"Didn't you see how I moved against Malfoy? Trust me, I can take care of myself..." Solieyu said, smiling in a way that almost seemed warm.

Sure enough, when they rounded the corner, they saw the troll again. It was halfway up the corridor, once more slamming itself into the wall. Instead of screaming in pain, it was now pawing at the spot where its other eye had previously occupied.

"That's disgusting." Tonks hissed.

"Ready you lot? Go! *WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA!*" Solieyu cried, aiming at the troll's club. As the troll turned itself around to see where the noise had come from, the light from Solieyu's spell had hit the club dead on. As he levitated the troll's weapon over its head, the dumb creature watched in confusion through its remaining eye.

"It's working!" Harry whispered fiercely as they rushed up and past it.

"Tonks, look out!" Solieyu yelled from the far end of the corridor.

Tonks let out a scream as she looked over her shoulder, flinging herself down to the floor as one of the troll's large hands, balled into a fist, soared toward her. It collided with the wall above her instead...though if she had remained standing, it would have no doubt split her head wide open.

Tonks was quickly on her feet again, scrambling over toward Harry, who had his wand out. "Leon, drop the club on its head!" He yelled.

"What? That won't work! Trolls' heads are ridiculously thick!" Solieyu yelled back.

"Just *DO IT!*" Harry yelled. "It'd be enough to daze it long enough for *all* of us to get out of here!"

Solieyu made an aggitated face, but complied with the request. The troll wasn't paying attention to its weapon anymore, anyway. It was currently glaring at Tonks and Harry and making pained noises as it clutched the hand that had impacted the wall.

When the club fell and connected, it made a horrifying *THUNK* noise before falling to one side and down to the ground. The troll stood quite still for a moment, looking quite confused. As it looked back up, Solieyu took his chance and rushed by it. "**RUN!**" He yelled as he caught up with Harry and Tonks, who had just been standing there and watching him.

Needing no further instruction, the other two took off as well.

Just about then, the troll realized what had just happened, letting out a wall-rattling scream. Tonks squeaked at this and the boys took up position behind and to either side of her. If the troll wanted to get to her, it would have to get through *them*.

"Left turn!" Solieyu suddenly called out. The others did as they were told. The trolls' loud, uneven footsteps were lumbering from

somewhere behind them. None of them decided to look back and see how far ahead they were.

"Another left and then straight for the door!" Solieyu called again as they reached the end of the current hallway.

"Hey, I remember this place...!" Harry said, eyes lighting up at the now-familiar scenary. "How do the Slytherins *do* this? It's like a maze down here!"

As they rounded the corner and charged ahead for the door to the Entrance Hall, Harry looked ahead at Tonks. "Change back to something normal! If one of the professors see you like that, you're bound to get into trouble!"

"What? Oh!" Tonks said, quickly realizing what Harry meant and changing her appearance. She now had short, spiky blonde hair and sky blue eyes. "There! Hey, look! The door's opening!"

And indeed it was. The door to the Entrance Hall flew open suddenly, revealing Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape. For the briefest of moments, surprise crossed the headmaster's face. He then drew and raised his wand, calling out, "Get down!"

The three did so at once. After all, if one of the strongest wizards alive couldn't best a one-eyed troll, then they were in real trouble.

Moments later, a beam of swirling orange light soared past them, connecting with the still-rampaging troll. When it made contact, it froze the troll up. For a moment, it didn't move. Then it slowly tilted forward...forward...forward... finally, it crashed to the ground, its club bouncing a time or two before it came to rest as well.

The three professors rushed over to the Ravenclaw trio, helping them up. "What were you three doing down here?" Professor McGonagall asked in a slightly high-pitched voice.

"Tonks was... was using the bathroom down there..." Harry panted. "She didn't know..."

"So you three decided to go and get her on your own, did you? Didn't think to tell one of the staff?"

"That is enough, Minerva... I believe these three have been through enough for one night. Are any of you injured?" Asked Dumbledore, raising a hand to stop the Transfiguration teacher's tirade.

"No, sir..." Harry and Solieyu said together.

"A bit thirsty... and hungry." Tonks said, frowning. "Missed dinner."

"Ahh, indeed... Minerva, Severus, if you would be so kind as to remove this creature from Hogwarts and its grounds..." Dumbledore began, looking to each professor in turn.

Both nodded, though McGonagall still looked rather tight-lipped.

"And, I believe, you should spread the word to the houses that all should be safe now. Of course, we will need to inspect the dungeons further later on... but for now..." Dumbledore trailed off, motioning for the Ravenclaws to follow him.

Dumbledore led them across the Entrance Hall, heading for the Great Hall. "I will not ask why Miss Tonks was using a bathroom so far away... though I suggest it not happen again." He said, his voice light, yet carrying a stern warning. "After you three have had your fill, head right back to Ravenclaw Tower... I shall inform Filius that you are all safe..."

"Yes, sir." The three said, hanging their heads slightly.

Dumbledore walked them over to one of the tables, which still carried a large amount of food. "I will begin spreading the word that all is now safe. Remember, head straight back to your house after you finish."

The headmaster turned and made to leave the room. Once he reached the doorway, however, he looked over his shoulder at them. "And, I believe, ten points apiece for managing to outrace and outwit a fully grown mountain troll..."

The Ravenclaw trio stared after him as he left the room.

"He's completely mad. Brilliant, but absolutely barking, nonetheless." Tonks said, wonder in her voice. Her stomach promptly growled, however, causing her to blush and turn back toward the table. "I hope you two don't mind if I wolf down food like I was starving."

"We never have in the past." Harry said, dryly.

Tonks smacked him... paused... then hugged him quickly. She then turned and gave Solieyu a hug as well. "...Thanks, you guys."

"What are friends for?" Solieyu said, smiling.

Harry smiled as well, though the thought brought Harry back to earlier in the night, when he and Solieyu had witnessed Ron Weasley insulting someone from his own house. Friends, Harry thought as his eyes glazed over, watch out for one another and don't judge others based on what they like to do.

Perhaps, he thought, it was time to seek this girl out...

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Author's Notes: And there you have it, folks! Halloween, Year 1, is now over with! I hope I made it entertaining enough. A quick little brawl in a bathroom seemed rather... bland. Especially since so many other remakes tend to use the scene as well. I don't think I've ever spotted a fic, however, where our heroes were CHASED by the troll. And what of the eye the troll was missing? What could THAT have been about?

And look, Ron's being an ass! I hope Ron fans don't come after me in a lynch mob. Though I don't like him as a character (not just because I find Ron-Hermione and Harry-Ginny pairings to be way too convenient) I do enjoy writing him as a slightly-obsessed fan of Harry's. And poor Hermione! No one saved HER from a troll... so she's still very alone, isn't she? I must thank my beta, Gabriel Shans, for suggesting Ron and Hermione's little fight. He also sparked the inspiration for a little exchange I'm going to have happen between Harry and Hermione in Chapter 17.

Got this one out quick, huh? I figured it was the least I could do after taking so long with 15. I'm hoping to have 17 done by the end of the weekend, since a majority of what's to happen is already planned out in my head. That always helps drive me in a straight line quicker.

Until next time, folks. Keep the speculation going...

Chapter 17 – Hide and Seek

Harry sighed, pushing his ham and eggs around on his plate.

"You feelin' alright, Harry?"

Blinking, Harry looked up at Tonks, who was staring at him with a look of concern on her face. Harry started to reply, frowned, then sat up straighter and shook his head.

"Not really." He said, poking his breakfast again. "Ever since Halloween, I've been trying to work a couple of things out..."

"Oh? What things?" Tonks asked.

"First," Harry began, ticking things off on his fingers as he went, "We have the troll. Despite what we saw in *that* place... I know there aren't supposed to be creatures like that in the school. Someone had to've let it in. But who?"

"Probably Snape." Tonks muttered darkly.

"Wouldn't surprise me. Wish I knew why the slimy git hates me so much... Anyway, *second*, what's wrong with those Gryffindors?"

"Whattaya mean?"

"That girl... Hermione Granger." Harry said. Since Halloween, which had been nearly two weeks ago, he had gone looking for information on the girl that Ron Weasley had chewed out. Though Harry had tried to seek the knowledge he wanted from the other first-year Gryffindor girls, he was shocked to find their reactions. Namely, they seemed to feel the same way Ron did - that Hermione was a know-it-all, bookworm, and thoroughly annoying.

"Oh, who knows. Maybe we should ask Fred and George. They're alright." Tonks said, taking a swig of her pumpkin juice. "Even if none of the others are."

"I was really surprised... I thought that Dean, at least, was better than that." Harry said, frowning. "Anyway... the third thing I've been wondering about concerns Leon."

"You're still bugged by how he knew all that stuff?" Tonks asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. There's something funny going on. Gonna be heading up to the library after I eat. Since I can't seem to follow him to the Hospital Wing, I'm going to see if looking up the symptoms to his supposed illness will bring any results..."

"Good thinking... But I don't think you're going to get a lot of results searching for what someone being a pale, quiet insomniac means." Tonks said, grinning. "Good luck, though."

"Thanks...I'm just glad I have the *time* to do it. I swear, Lynch is a bloody madman. Do you know he woke the lot of us up at five in the morning the day before yesterday? Wanted us out on the pitch for more ruddy practicing." Harry said, scowling. Their first match of the year - Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor - had been a week ago. Ravenclaw had pulled off a victory, though it was only just. The final score had been 200 to 210.

"Oh, don't sound so grumpy." Said Tonks, nudging him with her elbow. "You looked good out there!"

"It felt good out there." Harry admitted, lowering his head and grinning. "It feels wonderful being up on a broom..."

"Well, it's better than sitting in your chair for hours on end, in any case. That much reading can't be healthy." Tonks stated, jabbing a finger into the air.

"Quiet, you." Harry mock-growled. "I'll have you know that us intellectual types will inherit the world someday!"

"And what a boring existence it's going to be." Tonks said, sticking out her tongue. "What are you going to do? Rule with one iron fist around your broom and the other holding open a book?"

"If I must." Harry sniffed.

Tonks giggled, swatting Harry on the arm, which made him start laughing, as well.

Harry sobered up first, glancing toward the Gryffindor table and scanning those seated at it. "She isn't here. Have you noticed? She's rarely around for more than a few minutes... I can't believe that they'd *all* treat her so poorly just because she likes books and doesn't like rule breaking... It's just not right."

Tonks frowned, searching the Gryffindor table herself before sighing. "Think we should write to her or something?"

"No... No, I think I have a better idea. If you can find something to do without me for an afternoon." Harry said, smiling crookedly.

Tonks raised an eyebrow.

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Madam Pince smiled at Harry as he slipped into the library. To the old librarian, any *quiet* student was a *good* student. And Harry didn't like to mingle words; he got some books, he checked them out, and he went on his merry way. Or rather, that was what he normally did. On this visit, Harry had something else planned.

Walking over to Madam Pince, Harry whispered, "Excuse me, I'm looking for someone... only I'm not sure if she's here... Gryffindor girl, about this big..." Harry held a hand aloft to indicate height. "And probably alone..."

Madam Pince nodded slowly, her eyes scanning the familiar territory of her workplace. "Yes..." She began. "Yes, there is one girl who tends to come here alone that fits the bill... you'll find her off in the southeasternmost corner..."

"Thank you." Harry murmured, inclining his head slightly before taking off as quickly as he dared.

"Alright, Potter, let's see what good your so-called fame and glory can get you now. Save the world from a Dark Lord before you could walk, but now you have to speak to a girl you don't even know." Harry

mumbled under his breath as he scanned the rather vast library. "I hope I don't start stuttering again... uh-oh..."

Harry had located Hermione Granger. In a rather poorly-lit corner of the library, she sat, curled up and reading a book that seemed almost too large for her small frame.

Watching her silently for a moment, Harry couldn't help but feel sorry for the girl. He knew all too well what being pushed away felt like. He knew how it felt to be yelled at for being different. He knew and he didn't like seeing others going through the same ordeal. Taking a good, deep breath, he stepped out from behind the shelf he had been hiding behind, casually walking her way.

Harry kept his eyes on the books, however, so as not to spook the girl... Plus, it didn't hurt to scope out any titles he might want to come back and pick up at a later date. Always thinking ahead, Harry was.

When he reached the end of the row, he let his finger slowly run down the spines on a few books. Some were regular, plain books (by wizarding standards) and had no reaction to this move. However, there was always the bad egg of the group, and this set was no exception. As his finger passed along the spine of a book called 'Banshees and Their Love Lives,' a hideous shriek filled the air. This caused a number of things to happen almost at once.

One, Hermione Granger jumped and let out a high-pitched yelp, having not been paying any attention to the approaching boy.

Two, Harry jumped and let out an almost as high-pitched yelp, having not been expecting a book to scream at him.

And three, Madam Pince passed by to glare at them, pushing along a trolley of books. Harry thought it strange that the woman didn't simply use her magic to make the books find their *own* way back to their proper locations, but said nothing. Harry liked Madam Pince, even if she was a tad bit on the strict side when it came to keeping one's voice low.

But that wasn't the point - he had come to the library on a mission and he was currently neglecting that mission. Turning, he saw

Hermione with a hand on her chest, still breathing hard. Her book had toppled to the floor.

"Sorry." Harry whispered, frowning as he knelt to pick it up. But before he could reach out and grab it, Hermione had quickly snatched it back up for herself.

Harry blinked.

"W-what do you want...?" Hermione asked slowly, looking at Harry strangely. Then her eyes did an all-too-familiar flick up to his forehead - something Harry thought he would never get used to - and let out a gasp. "Y-you're..."

"Harry Potter, yeah." Said Harry, standing up against and smiling crookedly. "Didn't mean to make you drop your book, Miss...?" Though Harry knew her name, he felt that it couldn't hurt to be a bit on the polite side.

"G-Granger... Hermione Granger." Said Hermione, still looking at his forehead in wonder.

"What are you doing all by yourself back here? The light isn't very good." Harry said, trying to sound casual, as he leaned back against the bookshelf he had been previously looking at. "My eyes have already gone back, I'm afraid... no reason yours can't still be saved, though."

Hermione winced, staring down at the book on her lap. For a moment, Harry wondered if he was saying the right things. He hadn't come in with anything but a basic gameplan. Like on the Quidditch Pitch, Harry was flying by the seat of his pants and figuring out what to do as things happened.

"The others tease me if they see me..." Hermione finally said, her voice so soft that Harry had to strain to hear her.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"I don't know..." Hermione murmured, hands tightening around the edges of the book. "I-I spend a lot of time reading, I guess... and I try

and keep the other Gryffindor students from losing house points, but... but..." She trailed off, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Crying girls were definitely *not* something Harry was used to dealing with. Feeling more than a little nervous and uncomfortable, he tried steering the conversation in a different direction. "Nothing wrong with a good read."

"You don't understand..." Hermione whimpered. "I always have a book handy in case I'm not doing anything else... It's all so new to me, see... my parents are both Muggles, see...so's my little sister. None of them thought my invitation was real... and... and when I found out it was and... and that magic was *real*..."

"You wanted to find out and learn as much as there was." Harry finished softly, causing Hermione to sharply look up at him. He smiled at her and shrugged his shoulders. "I was the same. Kind of."

"But... but you're Harry Potter..." Hermione said, frowning. "Didn't you grow up... I don't know, *knowing* everything there was to know about the wizarding world?"

Harry knew the question was impending, and he had quickly thought up a good response to it. Letting out a sigh, Harry began, "No, not really. Up until a few months ago, I didn't know I was a wizard, either. I didn't even know I was famous until my best friend, Tonks, told me about what I had done when I was a baby..."

Hermione's frown deepened. "But... but why?" She asked.

"Simple. I live with my aunt, uncle, and cousin. None of them like me very much. In fact, if I hadn't met Tonks when I had, I doubt I would even be alive right now." Harry said, quietly.

"What do you mean?"

Hesitating for only a moment, Harry tugged the front of his robes and the shirt underneath down just enough for Hermione to see several long, shallow scars criss-crossing his chest. She peered forward, not quite understanding. When she saw what he was showing her, however, she gasped. "They didn't!"

"They did. And often." Harry said, leaning against the bookshelf once more. "I had spent one night in the park after running away one night. Tonks found me the next morning... I stayed at her place for the rest of the summer... Then she began telling me all these weird things; that I was a wizard, that I was some kind of hero... all sorts of stuff that was strange at the time..."

"The headmaster came over one night...gave me my letter to Hogwarts personally, since it wasn't getting through by regular owl post. Once I got here and settled in... well, I'd never really had anything to read or study..."

"Why not?" Hermione interrupted, tilting her head.

"Kept in a cupboard under the stairs." Harry shrugged. Hermione let out another quiet gasp.

"Anyway, the point is, once I got settled in and figured out how to get to the library without getting myself hopelessly lost, I began soaking things up like a sponge." Harry continued, leaning his head back as well. "Tonks complains regularly about me keeping my nose in a book all of the time when I'm not doing anything else. But it's all just so interesting... so many things I thought were only in my dreams turned out to be *REAL*..."

"...and you just wanted to find out as much as you could?" Hermione finished tentatively.

"Bingo. Hermione, look... I saw the way Ron was having a go at you a few weeks ago. I told Ron exactly how I felt about it, too. Since my cousin and his friends tended to pick on me all the time, I guess I've gotten this *thing* for sticking up for people since I learned I wasn't completely helpless..." Harry said, grinning slightly. "Do... *all* the Gryffindors act like complete prats to you?"

"Most..." Hermione said, voice quiet again.

"Some aren't?"

"Well...Ron's older brothers stuck up for me once when Ron was yelling at me for reading too much in the common room..." Hermione

smiled a little as she recalled the memory. "They turned his robes maroon. Ron looked furious..."

"Ah, good...I was really hoping Fred and George weren't being as thick as the rest of the Gryffindors." Harry said. "Me, Tonks, and Leon know them both...they've been helping us prank Malfoy all year."

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. "Draco Malfoy, you mean? Ohh, I wondered who was doing that..."

"Yeah. We gave them our list of pranks we'd like to see done to the big git, since we didn't know enough magic to do most of them by ourselves..." Harry explained. "Should we ask them to pull double duty and prank Ron any time they prank Malfoy?"

"Oh, no... I-I wouldn't want..." Hermione began.

"Come on," Harry said. "I've even got an idea just for the occasion. Malfoy's robes could turn Gryffindor colors and Ron's robes could turn Slytherin colors. They'd each think the other was behind it. If we lucked out, they might hex each other into the Hospital Wing for a week." Harry said, rolling the idea over in his mind and smiling.

"Oh, you don't mean that, do you? I don't want him to get hurt!" Hermione said.

"Why not? Ron deserves it anyway, for making you so upset. I told him straight out that I read all the time, too. Seemed to bring those rusty gears in his mind to a dead stop, that. He needs some sense knocked into him. And if Malfoy's the one to do it, so be it. I know I wouldn't lose any sleep over *that* prat being laid up with a broken jaw. Anything to shut him up..." Harry grumbled. "And don't worry about house points. The twins say they always at least break even before the end of the year... they make back all the points they lose!"

"I...I'll think about it..." Hermione said.

"Right. Well, come on, let's get out of this dark corner. Someone's going to mistake you for a Slytherin." Harry said, offering her his hand. "What were you reading, anyway?"

Hermione took his hand and got up after a moment's pause, then smiled slightly and showed Harry the cover of the book - *Hogwarts: A History*.

"How'd you get ahold of that?" Harry asked, gaping somewhat. "Every time I come in here looking for a copy, they're all checked out. ...You aren't hoarding the rest, are you?"

"Of course not!" Hermione said, grinning for the first time since she had met Harry. "I've had the same copy checked out for two and a half weeks, but I don't know who has the rest... ...You really were looking for it?" She added, a disbelieving look on her face.

As the two began walking, Harry said, "Are you kidding? If I'm going to get around this place without breaking any bones, I *need* to see what kind of history it has. Third week into September, I nearly broke my ankle after stepping on a breakaway step... Tonks had to help me get up to see Madam Pomfrey. Took almost half an hour - and it was lunchtime, too! All I got was a foul-tasting potion, though."

Hermione bit her lower lip to keep from laughing in the library. Madam Pince was looming around somewhere - they both knew that, even though they couldn't directly see her. They both were well aware of how silent the woman could sneak up on you.

"You're not at all like I'd imagined you... if you don't mind my saying so..." Hermione admitted as the two sat down in a well-lit section of the library. "I thought you would have been more like... like..."

"Malfoy?" Harry suggested.

"Well, no, not exactly... I just never thought..."

"That the famous Harry Potter had a really crummy childhood?" Harry finished with a grin.

"Well...yes..." She said, shrugging slightly. "You're a lot more... down to earth, I suppose I should say... than I had expected."

"I didn't ask to be famous. If I could, I'd wish it on someone else. People I don't even know come up to me and thank me for things I

don't understand..." Harry said, leaning back in his chair. "It's all so strange. A few months ago, I got beat and was locked in a cupboard. Now I'm on my own, relatively, and studying at a wizard's school... and I'm famous for defeating Voldemort."

Hermione squeaked.

"What?" Harry blinked. "...Oh! Right, sorry. Keep forgetting not to say the name..."

"It's not that... I've just... well, I've never really heard anyone say his name until just now. I've read about him, of course, but really..." Hermione said.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake..." Came a voice from nearby.

Looking over, Harry and Hermione saw Ron Weasley and a second year Gryffindor that Harry didn't know. Both were standing a few feet away and staring at Harry and Hermione as if they had sprouted boils.

"What?" Harry asked, forcing his annoyance down.

"You two! You're sitting there with that book opening like... like..." Ron said, sputtering for a good way to finish his sentence.

"Like we were studying? Or, perhaps, just reading for the *sake* of reading?" Harry offered, voice bland.

"Yeah! You should be out on the Quidditch Pitch or... or..."

"Signing autographs?" Harry offered, voice still dry.

"Yeah! Err, no! Oh, bloody hell, you know what I mean! You're important! Why waste your time here with *her*?" Ron said, flailing about.

"Because I chose to be." Harry said, a hard edge to his voice now. "Just because you and, apparently, most of the other Gryffindors want to get by on luck alone does not mean we all do. Nor do all of us think reading is a chore. If you have a problem with Hermione, you have a problem with *me*, Ron."

"You can't be serious..." Ron said, staring at Harry.

"Oh? And why is that? Just because you're too stupid to figure out how to enjoy a good book doesn't give you the right to rag on someone else for it. I don't like seeing anyone bullied, Weasley. I went through quite a lot myself before I came to Hogwarts." Harry said. His voice was barely a whisper - it didn't need to be any louder.

"You're completely barmy..." Ron said after a moment of stunned silence. "You're both completely barmy... What did you *do* to him?" He said, turning his attention to Hermione, who almost seemed to flinch.

"She did nothing to me." Harry said, voice turning dark. "And if you keep on talking to her as if she were a flobberworm, I'll make sure you get yours before all is said and done."

Ron turned back to Harry, looking genuinely surprised. "What? Hey, Harry, mate..."

"I'm not your mate." Harry spat quietly. "I don't make friends with thick prats who judge others. I keep very, very far away from them. Would you care to join Malfoy on my List, Ron?"

"List? What list?" Ron asked.

"Surely you've noticed all of the... odd happenings to our dear Slytherin friend." Harry said slowly.

"Well yeah. So?"

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione, making a show of rolling his eyes. Turning back to Ron, he murmured, "Who do you think thought up those pranks? Word has it you like *MAROON*, Ron. I could have your whole body turn a lovely shade of it for as long as you'd like, you know. Just keep being stubborn..."

Ron paled, then looked rather annoyed by the mention of the color maroon. "Who told you I liked maroon?!"

"Never you mind." Harry said. "Perhaps I should speak to Fred and George about this. I'm sure *they* would know what we should do about your being an insensitive git..."

"No! Don't tell them!" Ron said. "Look, Harry, I...I didn't mean anything by it...! Really!"

"Yes, I'll bet." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "I'm not sure why *you*, of all people, are here, Weasley. But if you came to upset Hermione, I suggest you and your friend turn right around and leave. I don't let my friends get bullied by anyone."

"Your friends?!" Ron exclaimed, earning a hissed "**SHH!**" from a passing Madam Pince. "She can't be your friend!"

"And why not? We both like reading. We both enjoy studying things. Is it really *that* hard to understand why we like to do these things?" Harry asked. "The only thing *you* are doing is making me angry. Now, call me stupid, but I just don't tend to make friends with jerks. You aren't doing a very good job getting on my good side."

Ron stared at him, looking almost as if someone had slapped him.

"Hermione, I know of this wonderful spot down by the lake where we could hopefully read without being chased around by certain Gryffindor prats. Care to see? I could round Tonks and Leon up, too. Never hurts to study in groups, right?" Harry offered, standing suddenly and smiling down at Hermione, who looked dumbstruck.

Ron did as well, though for entirely different reasons.

"A-alright..." Hermione finally said, standing as well and holding her copy of *Hogwarts: A History* to her chest. As she and Harry walked around a still-stunned Ron and out of the library, she looked over at him and asked, "Did you mean that?"

"What?"

"About... about meeting up with your friends and... and going down by the lake?"

"Course I did. Why would I lie?"

"Well.. I don't know... It just seemed as though all wizards hated having me around. You know, the only reason I tried going to the Halloween party was because Professor McGonagall asked me to. She said it would be good for me... that I might be able to make some friends there..."

"And then Ron killed the plan before it really even got started."

Hermione nodded. "I spent the rest of the evening up in the dorm, trying not to think about it. Oh, and I heard about what happened with the troll!" She suddenly said. "Did you really manage to escape without getting hurt?"

Harry smiled. "Yup. Here, I'm not sure where Tonks and Leon are, so I may as well explain what happened that night..."

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"I have no idea where those two are. Honestly. Maybe they're running around with Fred and George, I don't know. Think you can find them, girl?" Harry said softly, attaching a pair of small notes to Hedwig's legs. The snowy owl nipped affectionately at his finger before taking off and flying out of the Owlery.

Harry turned back to Hermione, shaking his head. "Sorry about dragging you all over the castle trying to find them. Anyway, you still up to check out that spot by the lake?"

Hermione nodded. "Sure..."

"Well, we've got a long walk ahead of us, then. Right, let's get going..." Harry said, stretching as he led Hermione back out of the room.

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"You haven't seen the giant squid yet?"

"No... I suppose I've never really come out here to just...relax."

Harry nodded, leaning back on his arms. The giant squid was quite a ways out in the lake, floating about lazily and soaking up as much heat from the sun as it could.

Hermione sat crosslegged next to him, watching the squid as well. "So," she began, looking over at him quickly. "You really don't like all the fame?"

"Loathe it." Harry said. "Girls make googly-eyes at me. Can I thank you for *not* doing that, by the way? I think you and Tonks are the only two who don't. Slytherin girls not included."

"Oi! There you are!" Came a voice from nearby.

Harry and Hermione turned to see Tonks (Short, green hair and yellow, cat-like eyes) rushing up to them, panting. "Your bloody owl nearly nipped my fingertip off!"

"Sorry." Harry said. "What were you doing?"

"Um... Reading." Tonks said, her cheeks warming up slightly.

Harry grinned. "Oh, really? Which book?"

"That isn't important." Tonks scowled, walking around Harry and sitting on the side Hermione wasn't on. "I woulda been out here sooner, but that airheaded tart Chang held me up..."

"Who?"

"Oh, surely you've noticed her." Tonks said, making a face. "Cho Chang! Hasn't been a night that's gone by where she hasn't sat across the room gazing at you like a lovesick puppy!"

Harry stared at his friend for a moment before sighing and turning to Hermione. "See what I mean? If either of you ever start acting like that, remind me to conk you upside the head with something."

"Noted." Tonks said, cheerfully. "So, this is the girl you were talkin' about?"

"Yeah." Harry said. "Hermione Granger, meet Nymphadora Tonks. I recommend calling her by her last name only. Tonks, Hermione Granger."

The two girls smiled and nodded at one another.

"Where's Leon?" Harry asked.

"Oh, who knows. Off being weird somewhere, probably. You know what they saw about strange people and the full moon." Tonks said, shrugging.

Harry blinked. "No, actually. Remember how I grew up."

"Right, sorry. Anyway, they say a lot of weird stuff happens on the full moon. Y'know, aside from werewolves popping up here an' there." Tonks explained.

Harry nodded, tilting his head Hermione's way again. "Seen any of the books on magical creatures yet? Must've gone through a half a dozen my first month here."

"Oh, I know..." Hermione said, eyes lighting up. "You didn't happen to check out 'Gargoyles, Werewolves, and Banshees: A Guide to Guarding Your Goods' did you?"

"I did." Harry said after thinking for a moment. "Wasn't that the one where the author tries putting a good spin on everything?"

Hermione nodded. "It is. I can't imagine chatting about with a ghoul, though, can you? How would you even get on with a banshee, anyway? If they open their mouths, they'd just injure or kill you..."

Tonks watched Harry and Hermione speaking as if watching a tennis game. Finally, she groaned. "It's bad enough Harry sits around reading in most of his spare time, can we please talk about somethin' else out here?"

"Aw, it's not so bad, Tonks." Harry said, grinning. "Why don't you chime in with what you've been reading, hmmm?"

Tonks glared at Harry for a moment then stuck her tongue out at him. Harry laughed. Beside him, Hermione was trying to bite back a grin.

Harry keeled over backwards entirely, sprawling out on the cool, autumn ground. "Hey, Tonks?"

"Yeah?"

"Number Fifty-Three needs revising. I was thinking of making the color maroon. That way we can involve Ron, too." Harry said, staring up at one of the few clouds overhead.

Tonks cycled through a mental copy of The List before blinking. "Why maroon?"

"Apparently, Ron hates it with a passion. Soooo, I was thinking..."

"...Of turning both him *and* Malfoy maroon? That's brilliant!" Tonks exclaimed, an evil gleam in her eyes.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but said nothing about Tonks finishing Harry's sentence for him. "Are you sure you two want to do that? I mean, you could get in trouble..."

"That isn't trouble." Tonks said. "Can you keep a secret?"

Hermione blinked. "I suppose so, why?"

"Well, me an' Harry know what *real* trouble is, don't we?" Tonks began, looking down at Harry. Harry, in turn, was searching Hermione's face for something.

When he spoke, it was slow. "Yeah... Yeah, we do. But you can't tell anyone if we tell you what it is, Hermione, alright?"

Hermione tilted her head, but nodded. Curiosity was getting the better of her.

Tonks looked back to Harry, almost bouncing in place. When Harry rolled his eyes and nodded, Tonks flew into how they had been chasing after Solieyu and how they had been chased into the third

floor corridor by Mrs. Norris. She then told Hermione all about the giant, black dog that had nearly eaten them. Hermione was quite a good listener, gaping and gasping at all the right moments.

"...So we booked it back to Ravenclaw Tower an' haven't spoken a word to anyone 'til now. Frankly, s'been drivin' me a bit batty." Tonks finished, blowing out a deep breath. "Terry and Gary know, I suppose, but they're both gits."

"Ooh, you two could have been killed!" Hermione said, worry evident in her voice.

"Yeah. But we weren't exactly paying attention to where we were at the time. I'm still confused as to how Leon got back that blasted cat of Filch's." Harry said, scowling. "He wasn't *that* far ahead of us. And it was like Mrs. Norris had been waiting there for us. I dunno. Something's weird about Leon, but I haven't been able to find anything that deals with his symptoms..."

"I could help, if you'd like." Hermione offered. "Two people looking would cover more ground..."

"You'd do that?" Harry asked, sitting back up and grinning.

"Well, what are friends for? Right?" Hermione asked, cheeks slightly pink again.

Harry smiled over at Tonks, who nodded sagely. "Right!" They both said.

The rest of the afternoon was spent outside by the lake, getting to know each other a bit better. When the sun began setting, they all decided it would be a good idea to get back inside. When they parted ways, Harry told Hermione that if anything bad happened to her to try and find the twins. Hermione nodded and started the climb to the seventh floor.

"She's nice. Bit of a bookworm like *you*..." Tonks said, eyeballing Harry and smiling crookedly. "She definitely doesn't deserve all o' the namecalling an' stuff that those Gryffindor gits are pulling..."

"Yeah... I was glad to see her happier." Harry admitted, slipping his hands into his pockets. "And hopefully Fred and George can help look out for her when she's up there. We should mention it to them whenever we see them next."

"And mention the revised prank?"

"And mention the revised prank." Harry nodded.

"So, do you wanna go lookin' for Leon, or--"

Tonks was cut off as Harry suddenly put a hand over her mouth and tugged her into the nearest classroom. She let out a confused 'mmph' but Harry put a finger to his lips and shushed her. Keeping the door cracked only slightly, Harry motioned for Tonks to peek out with him.

Moments later, Severus Snape came limping by. The lower portion of his robes looked more than slightly mangled and, judging by a darker patch of black and the limp, the man was wounded. Snape was also cursing rather darkly under his breath and hissing about a 'filthy mutt.'

Once he had hobbled to the end of the corridor and rounded the corner, Harry and Tonks slipped back out of their hiding place.

"Harry..." Tonks began slowly.

"Yeah. Looks like you, me, and those two prats aren't the only ones who dropped in on that dog... But why would HE go there?" Harry asked, brow creased.

"Oh, who knows. Coulda wanted to rip out an eyeball for a potion for all we know. Come on, let's get back to the common room."

When they did, however, it was only to find Terry Boot talking animatedly to a fourth year boy that Harry wasn't that familiar with.

"We didn't see *it* very well, but it was definitely on something!" Terry said, trying (and failing) to keep his voice low.

"On something?" The other boy asked.

"Yeah! Like a...like a trapdoor or something! Me an' Gary think that it's guarding something!" Terry said, a strange gleam in his eyes. The gleam, however, died out when he noticed Harry and Tonks were staring at him. Terry promptly cleared his throat, whispered something to the other boy, and got up to leave.

"...That was convenient." Tonks said slowly, watching Terry walk off.

"Very." Harry said, raising an eyebrow. "What's he going around and telling people for? Then they'll want to see for themselves..."

"He's an idiot. Don't try and figure him out." Tonks said, waving a hand in a dismissive way.

"Yeah, but..." Harry began. But Tonks was behind him and pushing him towards his favorite chair by that point.

"C'mon. I'll even sit and read with you. We can figure out what's goin' on some other time. I just wanna relax." Tonks said, grabbing a random book from the pile beside the chair. "'Divination - Opening Your Inner Eye'? Oh, lovely."

But even as he sat and grabbed a random book as well, Harry couldn't help but wonder just what, exactly, was going on. Finding Terry blabbing about his experience on the third floor wasn't exactly new. It had to have been the eleventh time they had overheard the boy telling someone else about his and Gary's near-death experience. What was new, however, was the bit about the trapdoor.

It couldn't be that Terry was embellishing... why would he? It didn't make his story any more exciting. Various thoughts floated around his mind, just waiting to be placed in their proper order. But it wasn't to happen tonight. The common room was much too noisy. Glancing up at Tonks, who looked to be making at least an attempt at reading the book she had chosen, Harry sighed inaudibly.

She was right - whatever was going on, it could wait until another day. Even if Snape was trying to get past the dog - an entirely possible scenario, given what they had witnessed earlier - he hadn't succeeded. And, if the man was wise, he wouldn't be trying again any time soon. Sinking back into his chair, Harry flipped the book open to

the middle and glancing along its pages until something caught his eye.

He and Tonks spent the rest of the evening reading in relative peace.

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Author's Notes: Yeah, I can't write Quidditch scenes to save my life. I'll make an effort when they're directly related to important plot points, like in third year with the dementors... but as it stands, they're just bits of fluff right now. I'll write the before's and after's, but no in-betweens. Trust me, it wouldn't be pretty.

So! Another chapter cranked out relatively quickly. I even came over a bout of indecision and writer's block tonight. Good for me. It'll take a bit longer for the next chapter since this is as far as I've mentally planned things. I'll hafta go and look for ideas in my chapter guide, which I've well deviated from at this point. Hermione and the gang (or at least Harry and Tonks) are friends now. Ron's still an ass. Leon's still, for the most part, absent. And another prank looms on the horizon.

And then there's Fluffy. I need to go back and read the original material to see when the Prophet mentions a break-in at Gringotts. That oughta be coming up before TOO long, if it shouldn't have already. The pieces are slowly, but surely, coming together. And Smart!Harry isn't one to just let things die.

That being said, what say I glance over the next month or so and get right around to December? That'd help push me along, though I'm not too sure what to do for Christmas presents and such. I've admittedly not spent a lot of time on present ideas, though I really should have.

Anyway, enough out of me. Thanks for all the reviews, folks! I'll try and get 18 out within a week or so's time.

Post cleanup note: Gonna get a few more chapters done tonight (January 11, 1:50AM) as I can. Sorry for putting it off, guys. I'm horribly lazy.

Chapter 18 – Snowfall

"...There was nothing I could do after that. Though I tried my hardest to save her, the only thing I could offer her, in the end, was a proper burial. Scooping up her lifeless frame, I waded out into the ocean, as far as I dared go, and bid her one last goodbye. Letting go of her, I drew my wand and murmured a spell to allow her body to sink to the deepest part of the sea. She would be at peace now.

"And I? I spent the next few years wandering throughout Europe and the better part of Asia, trying to hunt down the man who had slain my beloved Tara. I never found him and, to this day, I suffer from severe nightmares that bring me back to the moment in time she drew her last breath. I now await my final hour to come, living alone in the house we had promised to stay in until the day we both died.

"Though I failed to save her, I can only hope and pray that she awaits me on the other side. If not for the promise I made, so very long ago when we both were young, that I would continue on if she left this world too soon... Well, let us not dwell on what I might have done. One cannot change the past, no matter how desperately one may wish at times. And in the end, we all must travel down the path we best see fit. We must always strive on, no matter the difficulties. And we must never forget those who fell before us, lest their memories be lost forever to time's cruel embrace."

Harry slowly closed the book he had finished and ran a hand over its tattered, leather cover. From the arm of his chair, Harry could hear Tonks try to hide a snuffle. He was also faintly aware that all other noises in the common room had come to a halt. He wasn't aware of when, exactly, he had started to read aloud, though it must have been for at least a few paragraphs.

The book was a true story of the trials one man, a Thomas Colswatter, had endured through his one hundred and twenty-three years. He had died, completely alone, in the house he was destined to spend his remaining years at, not a week after finishing the final chapter. Harry had found the book merely by accident as he slowly wandered the school's library in search of something to read that didn't feel so much like a textbook.

It wasn't a long book by any means, but the heart put into it more than made up for the fact. As Harry moved the book aside, being careful not to catch the cover's tattered form on anything, he looked aside at Tonks. His friend was staring determinedly across the room and at the fire. The shimmer in the corners of her eyes was not lost on Harry. And, as he joined her in watching the flames dance, he couldn't help but pray that he would never have to say goodbye to anyone in the manner Colswatter had.

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"Ooh, look! The first snow of the season!"

Harry's shoulders tensed momentarily as a third year Gryffindor pointed outside. Without bothering to turn and look as so many of the other students were, Harry continued down the corridor. Tonks, who had been one of the many to press against the windows, finally noticed her friend walking off without her.

Blinking, she looked outside once more before running to catch up with him. "Oi! Where ya goin'?" She asked once she had fallen in step beside him again. "Don'tcha wanna come an' look at the snow?"

"No." Harry said, voice unusually clipped.

"What's eatin' you?"

"Nothing. Come on, let's get to class. I'd rather not have Snape breathing down my neck." Harry said quickly. Then, under his breath, he muttered, "Especially today..."

But if Harry had expected the Potions Master to be kind to him just because he and Tonks showed up on time, he was sorely mistaken. Almost as soon as the dark-haired man swept into the room, his eyes focused on Harry.

"Potter!" He snapped. "Five points from Ravenclaw."

Tonks goggled at the Potions Master. "What? Why?" She asked.

"For sulking. And, I believe, another five for your outburst. Now, if we may get past whatever puerile problems that have arisen in your lives, WE HAVE A CLASS TO START!" Snape growled.

Snorting out a breath, the Potions Master promptly spun around and strode over and behind his desk. Pulling his wand and flicking it at the blackboard, a list of ingredients appeared. Tucking his wand back into his wand, Snape turned to address his students again.

"Today... We will begin the Pustulcius Potion. Providing none of you blow up another cauldron and actually get things correct for once, this simple potion will help heal boils of all shapes and sizes." Snape paused, his dark gaze moving to each and every first year in the class.

"Begin!"

Students immediately had quills and parchment out, jotting down the list of ingredients. As Tonks jotted things down, Harry got up to get what they would need. Being careful to avoid his professor's eyes, Harry quickly rounded up three twigs from a Foaming Ficus, four clipped toenails of a Cornish Pixy, a handful of ground-up salamander droppings, a pair of tadpole brains, and numerous other slimy things.

Setting them down carefully as he got back to his table, he saw Tonks looking at him strangely. With a scowl, he mouthed 'I'm fine!' at her as he sat. Looking over at her list, Harry began rearranging ingredients in the order they would be needed.

Class proceeded in relative silence. That is, until one of the first year Slytherin girls accidentally put in both tadpole brains instead of letting one dissolve before adding the other. This caused her cauldron to do two things; it turned a startling shade of pink and it began emitting an equally-bright, equally-pink smoke.

Snape rushed across the classroom to stop the cauldron from reaching the final step - melting down and coating the floors in the goo. As he was helping the girl out, Tonks was biting her lower lip to keep from laughing.

From one seat ahead of them, Solieyu (who had already been in the classroom when Harry and Tonks had arrived) looked over his shoulder. He looked to Snape, then to Tonks, then to Harry. Frowning, he promptly turned back around and shook his head slightly. Harry and Tonks exchanged a confused glance at this odd behavior, but otherwise said nothing. After all, Snape seemed to be in a perpetually bad mood. There was no reason to raise his ire.

Once the class was starting to come to an end, Snape got back up from his desk and started making his rounds, peering into cauldrons.

"Now then... your potions should be a light green color and should smell vaguely of chestnuts... Malfoy, you seem to have gotten it perfect. Ten points to Slytherin..." Snape said as he passed by the blonde, barely bothering to even look down at the boy's cauldron. If he had, he would have noticed that Malfoy's potion was dull blue and smelled something like a dung bomb.

Harry scowled inwardly.

"Potter! Let us see how yours is doing, shall we?" Snape asked, icily. Drifting over, he gazed long and hard down at the concoction Harry and Tonks had made. "...Three shades too bright and the smell is distinctly that of hazelnuts and not chestnuts. Five points apiece from Ravenclaw. I suggest you start learning how to properly let your brews simmer if you wish to pass my class!"

And with that, Snape was off, judging other students' potions.

When class let out, Harry was the first out of the room. Tonks, meanwhile, stayed behind with half the class to fill vials half full with their results. By the time she worked her way out into the dungeon hallway, Harry was nowhere to be seen. Solieyu, however, was leaning back against a wall, arms crossed over his chest.

"Is there something bothering Harry?" Solieyu asked quietly as Tonks approached.

Keeping her voice quiet as well, (since Malfoy was currently walking past) Tonks shrugged and murmured, "Dunno. He was actin' weird before class, too... He run off somewhere?"

"Mm. Back to the common room, perhaps? I think it's finally gotten too cold for him to wander down by the lake." Solieyu said, shoving himself away from the wall.

The two began walking. "Or in the library." Tonks said, tilting her head in thought. "I think he said he was almost finished with the current stack of books he had out..."

"Might I suggest splitting up at the stairway, then? I'll head to the library... I was going to go, anyway. I need to find a book on the finer points of hedgehog transfiguration for McGonagall." Solieyu said, looking as if he had no desire to search for such a book.

Tonks nodded. "Alright. I'll head back to the Tower, then. If we don't see him by supertime, let's check out by the lake, anyway."

"If it comes to that, I hope we won't find him covered in icicles."

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Time slowly passed with neither Tonks nor Solieyu finding Harry. It was nearly time for the final meal of the day and, as they walked down to the Entrance Hall, Tonks let out a sigh. "I'm gonna go out an' check the lake. I dunno why he'd have been out there all day, but if he's there, I'll bring him back in. If he hasn't already frozen himself..."

Solieyu nodded. "Come get me if you need any help."

Tonks smiled slightly at him and headed for the giant front doors of the school. Walking outside, the girl looked back and forth across the school grounds. The snow, which had been lazily falling all day, was only now beginning to stick to things. The ground was finally cold enough to prevent it from melting upon contact.

With another sigh, Tonks caught sight of who she had been searching for. Harry was sitting in one of the few spots in the whole of Hogwarts territory that he liked to call 'his' - a few feet away from the lake, knees drawn up to his chest. He had his arms wrapped around his knees and seemed to be little more than a statue as he gazed out over the freezing cold water.

"Harry...?" Tonks asked as she approached. When she got no response, she bit her lower lip and got closer. When she did, she saw a tiny ball of blue fire glowing on the ground next to Harry's body. Squatting down - to get as little of her clothing as wet as possible - Tonks could feel a faint heat radiating from the glowing ball.

"Harry?" She tried again, reaching over and gently nudging his shoulder. This seemed to snap him out of the daze he was in. Harry blinked slowly a few times, frowned, then looked over toward Tonks.

"We've been lookin' for ya since Potions..." Tonks said, her voice quiet. "You haven't been out *here* the whole time, have ya?"

"I have." Harry said. His voice sounded raspy.

"I was starting to get worried..."

"Sorry."

"What's wrong...?"

Harry let out a deep sigh. Though he had been expecting one of his friends to hunt him down, he had hoped they wouldn't ask why he had vanished for the better part of the day.

"I don't like December." Harry answered simply.

Tonks blinked. Whatever she had figured Harry would reply with, that certainly wasn't it. Tilting her head, she asked, "Why?"

Harry smiled grimly. "Remember who I grew up with."

Tonks started to say something, then looked down at the glowing ball of warmth in-between them. "Magic fire?"

"Yeah... started getting cold."

Tonks nodded and pulled out her wand, moving the fire out in front of them so she could scoot over. "So... what was it like around the Dursleys' at Christmas?"

Harry sighed quietly. "Well, as far back as I can recall, I've always hated it. To be honest, the Dursleys were always a bit odd around this time of year. They like watching special programs on television about Christmas as long as they don't include songs. They absolutely hated Christmas carols. Uncle Vernon nearly clocked a caroller with a waffle iron one year..."

"Ouch. I take it that they didn't exactly let you in on the festivities, huh?" Tonks asked, staring out across the lake.

"Yeah. Oh, they made sure to get me a gift each year... Though what purpose a pair of my uncle's socks with a hole in the heels could have is beyond me. Let's see... when I was five - that's as far back as I can remember - I got some socks. When I was six, I got one earmuff..."

"One earmuff?"

"Yeah. It only covered *an* ear. The other had to fend for itself."

"Ahh."

"When I was seven, I got the tip of the old garden hose for some reason. When I was eight they gave me a single, dry spaghetti noodle. When I was nine, I got a fruitcake... for all the good it did me. It wasn't as if the bloody thing was edible. And last year, I got a hairpin." Harry finished, scowling.

"I'd love to give your relatives a howler, you know that?" Tonks said, wiggling her nose as a snowflake landed on the tip of it.

"A howler?" Harry asked, tilting his head slightly.

"Yeah." As Tonks explained the finer workings of what, exactly, a howler was, Harry couldn't help but smile a little. If he knew he wouldn't wind up getting shoved around for sending such a blatantly magical letter to their house, Harry would have sent one.

"Anyway..." Harry went on after a few minutes of silence. "One year, Uncle Vernon was particularly angry with me... I think I hadn't kept the drive free of snow or something. This was back around when I

was seven or eight, by the way. I was laying around inside the cupboard, starting to drift off to sleep... next thing I knew, light flooded in, I was grabbed, I got dragged out into the back yard, and..."

"And...?"

Harry shut his eyes, blowing out a low sigh. "And was chained up to the shed out back. He left me there for the rest of the night. After that, it was a regular punishment during snowy months. Any time I'd do something wrong in their eyes, I'd get thrown into the back yard to nearly freeze to death overnight..."

"What?! Harry, that's horrible! Why didn't you tell me sooner?! I coulda gotten mum to hex them into next week!" Tonks said, gaping at her friend.

Harry shrugged. "It wouldn't have done any good. It's all in the past. I just don't like being reminded of it."

Running a hand back through his hair to brush the snow off of his head, Harry opened his eyes halfway. "You should go on in to dinner, Tonks. I'll be in sometime before it's over with..."

"Oh, no you don't." Tonks said, crossing her arms firmly over her chest. "I'm not moving 'til you do!"

"Tonks..." Harry began, turning to look at her with a tired expression on his face. But Tonks would have none of it. She pushed the snow on the ground around her away so she could sit on a clean (yet still cold) patch of grass.

"Not listening." Tonks said, sticking her nose up and shutting her eyes. "I'll go in when you do and not a moment sooner!"

"I'm used to this, Tonks. You aren't." Harry said.

"You shouldn't *have* to be!" Tonks yelled, eyes snapping open as she looked to Harry. "You shouldn't have to be used to such awful things like this! And you shouldn't force yourself to go through them by yourself! I'm not gonna run off and leave if you want to get somethin'

like that off your chest, you dolt! S'what friends are for, isn't it? Helping each other through hard times?"

"Tonks..."

"Oh, be quiet an' listen, alright?" Tonks huffed. "You coulda at least asked me to come out here with ya... thatcha wanted to talk or somethin'... I've been worried sick! And I know Leon has been, too! He helped me search for you..."

"He didn't disappear after class, huh?" Harry murmured, trying to smile.

"No, he didn't. You did a fine job of that on your own." Tonks retorted. Harry winced.

"Look, Harry... you're never gonna be able to start gettin' over this stuff if you don't let us help you out when you need it, alright?" Tonks went on, putting an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Just because every Christmas you've had in the past has sucked with teeth doesn't mean this year's will. And, if it takes me 'til the end of winter, I'm gonna teach ya how to have *fun* in the snow... So just... don't run off and not tell me where you're gonna be again... alright?"

Harry blinked at the sudden sadness in his friend's voice. Turning his head, he saw that Tonks was looking off the other way. Feeling rather rotten for making her so upset, Harry slipped one of his arms around Tonks' shoulders, just as she was doing with him. His voice quiet, Harry murmured, "I didn't mean to make you sad or anything..."

With a great sniff and a quick swipe at her eyes with her free hand, Tonks looked back to Harry and frowned. "I know... And I know you've had a right crummy past. But that's all it is - the past. Won't do you any good sitting an' brooding on it. At the very least, do your brooding in the common room... s'warmer in there... and the fire's much more interesting to stare at..."

"Sorry." Harry muttered, casting his eyes down. "I know I should feel pretty stupid for acting like this after so many months, but... seeing the snow again suddenly brought back stuff I had locked away..."

Tonks nodded, leaning against Harry slightly. "It's alright... Just glad you're gettin' it off your chest. Mum says bottling up your emotions only makes things worse. Anything else been buggin' you lately, Harry?"

Leaning back just as slightly, Harry murmured, "No..."

"Kay... jus' lemme know if you think of anything, though. No matter what, I promise I won't leave ya out in the cold..."

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"Hermione, are you terribly busy?"

Looking up from her meal, Hermione blinked. "Not at all. I was just finishing up here. Is something wrong, Leon?"

Solieyu sighed, casting a glance back at the doors to the Great Hall, which hadn't opened since he had walked through. "You could say that. Harry's been missing for most of the afternoon... Tonks was going to go out to the lake to see if he was there, but she hasn't returned, either. I'm starting to get worried and I was hoping I could count on you to help me search for the both of them..."

Hermione excused herself quickly and stood. "Of course you can! Did you want to start the search now?"

"I would. The first place we need to check is down by the lake. I'd rather not think about needing to drag two frozen bodies up to the fourth floor, but...I fear we may have to if they stay out there any longer. Providing, of course, that they *are* out there." Solieyu said.

The two turned and walked out of the Great Hall.

Heading for the front doors of the school and stepping outside, both first years scanned the general area for life. Hermione was the one who spotted their targets first. "Aww..."

"'Aww'?" Solieyu said, turning to look at Hermione.

Hermione was smiling. She pointed and Solieyu followed the direction until he saw what she was looking at.

Harry and Tonks were still sitting down by the lake. Many more balls of magical fire had long since joined the first that Harry had made, forming a small circle around the pair. They were leaning against one another and seemed to be talking quietly. Both still had an arm around the other.

"Oh, don't they look so cute together?" Hermione gushed, grinning.

Solieyu raised an eyebrow. "Cute? They're probably just huddled together to keep themselves warm. Magical fire doesn't give off *that* much heat...even when there are a dozen of them scattered nearby."

"Well, yes, but still... that looks like it's a bit more than that, don't you think?" Hermione asked.

Solieyu turned his gaze outward again, looking at his friends as they talked. "...Perhaps, perhaps not. Harry seemed to be acting strange in Potions today. I'm certain that Professor Snape didn't help his mood any... Perhaps he just wanted some time to himself to sort some things out. Those two *can* get rather chatty when they get into a conversation."

"Should we go get them?" Asked Hermione.

"...Perhaps," Solieyu said once more, "...we could wait for just a little while longer. Five minutes at the most, though. As much as they look at peace, I wouldn't want either to get sick due to choosing a bad spot to have a talk."

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Author's Notes: Fair warning here, y'all. I'm nooooot sure how fast the next few chapters are gonna be spit out. Reason? Well, my birthday is Saturday, October 2nd (Huzzah, 23 years old) and I'll probably be off in a half-assed attempt at celebrating that. Tony Hawk's Underground 2 comes out the 4th. That's gonna hold my attention for awhile, I'm sure. Paper Mario 2 comes out the 11th. Then Metroid Prime 2 comes out like halfway into November. Yar. Don't worry,

though. Usually I don't play games after midnight...and as I tend to write after 2 in the morning, things SHOULD be okay.

Just hope my arms don't start aching like a loony from my playing my soon-to-be new games and all will be fine. I'm gonna try my best to keep chapters cranking out at a steady rate. At the worst, I'll try NEVER to make a wait two weeks or over. I still occasionally get writer's block, after all, and sometimes I'm just not in the mood to write. Thankfully, the writer's block for Retransmuted here has been quite low. There's still some stuff I need to jury-rig into the thing, such as the Gringott's Break-In, but... all in good time.

Oh, and I hope no one minded the filler chapter... I wanted something sweet to lead into the Christmas chapter. And, damn it all, I wanted some fluff! And fluff I've given you! ...Well, I guess it counts as fluff. I didn't want too much other than a cute scene that showed how much Tonks cared about Harry's well-being. And in any case, Harry is oblivious as always. It'll take a few more years for real feelings to bloom.

And before anyone starts getting ideas... no, I'm not planning to pair up Leon and Hermione. So nyeh.

You'll notice I jumped ahead again. I've kinda idled in certain spots a bit too long and wanted to move ahead to certain plot points. Harry may be in Ravenclaw, but a certain cloak just may prove his downfall. The next chapter? Christmas. Hopefully it'll take less than a week to write.

Chapter 19 – Christmas

Christmas Day was always a special occasion at the Tonks household. Every year, Tonks' mother would decorate the whole house before her daughter even thought about crawling out of bed. At dinner, special things would be served. Quiet, holiday music would be piped throughout the whole of the house. And, Tonks' favorite, the presents were always great. Waking up and having things to open always made her feel good.

Tonks had quietly tugged Harry's trunk around beside his bed and was currently watching her friend sleep. The rest of the boys in Harry's dorm had gone home for the holidays, leaving him alone in the room. Tonks didn't feel this was very healthy for the boy - especially given how gloomy he had been acting ever since the first snow had fallen.

She had considered simply pouncing Harry and telling him to hurry and wake up... but given the history she knew between he and his relatives, the idea didn't hang around too long. The truth was, she was getting quite worried about her friend. Harry had been getting so much better after he had been pulled away from the Dursleys... only to have the memories come crashing back during what should have been one of the happiest times of the year.

It just wasn't fair, and Tonks had said so to Solieyu on numerous occasions. The long-haired boy had agreed and mentioned that he was going to get something for Harry for Christmas. Tonks had replied that both she and her mother were, as well. Past that and the odd gift from a brave admirer, Tonks wasn't sure how many presents Harry would wind up with. Harry wasn't exactly on good terms with the three other boys in his dorm. Neither Terry nor Gary spoke to Harry directly when they could help it. And Tonks didn't even keep track of what the third one's name was, so she assumed that a gift from him was out, as well.

With a sigh, Tonks leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees and resting her chin in her hands. She had been sitting around for almost an hour, as Christmas was the one day she had never slept in on. It wasn't pretty watching Harry sleep, as the boy didn't seem to

rest well under the best of circumstances. For reasons he wouldn't tell her, Harry seemed to have a lot of nightmares. He seemed to have gone through nearly half a dozen or so since Tonks had arrived.

After nearly ten minutes of sitting and waiting patiently - something that Tonks wasn't well known for - Harry finally woke up. Tonks would have been happy, save for the fact that it wasn't a pretty sight, either. From the position he had been sleeping in, on his back, Harry had sat bolt upright, eyes wide. For a moment, his eyes darted around the room, not really taking anything in. His breathing was rapid and shallow and he seemed to be almost drenched in sweat.

Tonks was all too aware of how Harry tended to wake up from nightmares after the few she had witnessed back at her house, so she knew exactly what to do. She was going to sit where she was, make no sudden movements, and wait for Harry's brain to register that he had only been dreaming and that he was safe at Hogwarts.

It didn't take long. Harry's eyes eventually slid shut for a few seconds as his breathing stabilized. He rubbed at the center of his chest for a moment before reopening his eyes.

"Happy Christmas?" Tonks tried, softly.

Harry blinked and turned his head to face the girl, who was still dressed in her pajamas. She and Harry had tended to lounge around her house until noon in their pajamas, so it wasn't anything new to either of them. If anything, seeing Tonks in casual clothes almost seemed to help ease Harry's slightly haywire brain. He let out a long breath of air when he realized that she was actually sitting nearby and that it wasn't his imagination playing strange tricks on him after waking from a nightmare.

"What're you doing here?" Harry asked after his brain also realized that Tonks sitting on his truck wasn't a normal occurrence.

"Waitin' for you to wake up." Tonks said, shrugging. "Been here awhile. I woulda tried wakin' you up, but..."

"Yeah, good idea." Harry replied, slumping forward a little and running a hand back through his hair. "Did you say it was Christmas?"

Tonks rolled her eyes. "No, I said I was off snogging the Grande Royal Ponce in a broom closet earlier. Yes, it's Christmas, you silly sod. Now c'mon, we've gotta go open presents! I've been waitin' here long enough!"

Harry only blinked again. "We've got to open presents? What do you mean?"

"Oh, honestly, Harry... Sometimes you're thicker than whatever Malfoy puts in his hair. I mean you've got presents and I've got presents and we should go open them!" Tonks said, hopping to her feet and hauling Harry's trunk back to the foot of his bed.

"I have presents...?" Harry asked, sounding entirely confused.

"Am I gonna hafta drag you downstairs?" Tonks asked, walking back around and putting her hands on her hips. "Or can you manage on your own?"

Harry looked as if he was working something out in his mind. It also looked as if he were adding 2 and 2 and getting 5 as an answer.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake..." Tonks murmured, walking over and grabbing Harry by the arm. "Up you go! Come on! Can't spend all day looking daft in your bed, Harry!"

"O...Oi!" Harry said as he was dragged to the edge of his bed, where he promptly fell to the floor. Glaring at Tonks' feet, one of which was tapping impatiently, Harry grumbled, "I *will* get you for that, you know."

"Gotta catch me first." Tonks said, smiling pleasantly down at him.

And with that, the chase was on. Having an advantage, Tonks sped out of the dorm room. Harry, after scrambling to his feet, rushed after her, barely managing not to run headfirst as Tonks slung the door to the room shut on her way out.

"Get back here!" Harry cried as he tore out of the room. By this point, Tonks had made it down to the common room and was maneuvering herself around the large couch by the fire, keeping it between herself and her pursuer.

"Not on your life! Here, catch!" Tonks replied as Harry burst into the common room, as well. Before Harry could close the gap between them, she had tossed a small, wrapped package at him. Seeker reflexes kicking in, Harry ducked and grabbed at it before it could pelt him in the head. He started to fling it back at Tonks, but stopped when he saw who it was to - him.

Brows came together and Harry stared down at the wrapped present as if it were the strangest thing he had ever seen in his life... which probably wasn't far from the truth, Tonks reckoned.

"Like I said earlier, Happy Christmas!" Tonks said, cheerfully, flopping down beside the large christmas tree that had been set up in the room. As she sorted her gifts and Harry's into two piles, she blinked.

"Harry?"

The boy in question looked up. "Huh?"

"Come over here..."

Tilting his head, Harry did so, sitting down nearby. "What is it?"

"Did you get me something?" Tonks asked, looking as confused as Harry had just moments before. "Usually I get one or two things from mum, some bit of junk from *dad*..." Tonks growled out the word darkly. "And something from my cousin, Aggie... But I've got six gifts here..."

"And two seem to be from me?" Harry supplied, finally understanding. With a smile, he shrugged and continued, "I sent a note to your mum, asking her how I could get you something. She wrote back and sent a few catalogues with the letter. I looked around, circled the two things I wanted to get you, and sent her a reply with the money they would cost."

"You sneak! Mum didn't tell me any o' this!" Tonks gaped.

"Well, yeah, that was kind of the point." Harry said, rolling his eyes.

Swatting Harry playfully on the arm, she smirked. "Well, we're even, then. I got you two things, too. And mum got you something, from the looks of it! This one..." Tonks looked down as she continued sorting gifts, "Is from Leon... and this is-- oh, ew-- this is from Cho Chang!"

"Isn't she that second-year that kept making googly eyes at me that one night in the Great Hall?" Harry asked.

"She does it in more places than that...remember what I toldja down by the lake? Anyway, looks like you have a few more presents that me!"

"So I noticed..." Harry said, voice getting quiet. "Tonks... well, you know how I am around this time of the year."

"Yup. I thought you could do with some *real* Christmas presents for a change." Tonks said, smiling. "And before you go thanking me, don't. It's what friends are for, isn't it? I wouldn't be a very good friend if I didn't get you anything. Here, open the smaller one first!"

Though there were a few other Ravenclaws staying over the holidays, Harry and Tonks seemed to be the first ones awake. Christmas did fall on a Sunday this year, after all, and most people were still sleeping in. A sizable pile of presents for them still sat under the tree.

Tonks was practically bouncing in place as Harry looked at the box that almost smashed into his forehead earlier. It wasn't very heavy, and shaking it yielded no clues as to what was inside. Giving Tonks a strange look, Harry tore through the wrapping paper. Having never done it before, Harry found it to be rather fun.

Harry opened the box that was underneath the paper...and promptly came face to face with a single earmuff. As Harry groaned, Tonks dissolved into giggles.

"Sorry, Harry, I had to! Now that lone earmuff your relatives gave to you can have a best mate!" Tonks said through her laughter. She had to duck a moment later as Harry, who was trying not to smile, lobbed the thing at her.

"Ha-ha." Harry said, dryly. "Very funny. Alright then, open the larger of my two presents to you!"

Tonks was tearing through the wrapping paper before Harry fully finished his sentence. When she pulled the top off the box underneath, it was her turn to gape and Harry's to start laughing. Staring back at her from inside the box was a large, rainbow-colored clown wig.

"Turnabout, my dear Tonks, is fair play." Harry stated, quickly leaning over to avoid getting beaned with the wig.

"Looks like we both had the same idea on joke gifts, then." Tonks said, shaking her head. "My other one's a real present. How about yours?"

"Real, too." Harry said, grabbing the wig and trying to put it on his friend's head. This earned him another light swat.

In the end, Tonks had gotten a large book on strange dark creatures from Harry. He bought it for her on the grounds that she always seemed to actually sit down and read when the book concerned creepy and odd things. She also ended up with a dark-blue sweatshirt that changed to whatever color her eyes were and a small pile of sweets.

Harry ended up with a book from Tonks, as well. It turned out to be rather thick and was on the subject of Metamorphmagi. In addition to general background information on just why they were so rare, it had an entire section on how to see if you were one. Included were how to start off, how to change eye color, hair color, and to adjust one's height and weight at will.

In addition, Harry received a sweater just like Tonks received, along with a note encouraging him in his Metamorphmagus training.

The gift from Cho Chang had been rather strange - it was a photograph (of the wizarding variety, of course) that kept winking and blowing kisses at Harry. Tonks spent a good hour after seeing it describing how insane the girl was.

Finally, and strangest of all, was a package that was unmarked save for a little note attached to one side that read, 'Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it all.'

"Who's it from?" Tonks asked quietly.

"Dunno... It didn't say." Harry replied, frowning deeply. "It said that whatever's inside belonged to my dad, though."

Intent on finding out what was inside, Harry ripped through the ornate paper. Inside was something silvery gray and very silken. Harry slowly removed the item from the box, standing up as he did so.

"Wow..." Tonks whispered.

"It looks like a cloak..." Harry said, frowning even more. "Why would someone send me a cloak?"

"It's not just any old cloak, Harry!" Tonks said in an excited whisper. "That's an invisibility cloak, that is!"

"An invisibility cloak?" Harry repeated.

"Yeah! Try it on!" Tonks said, hopping to her feet as well.

Harry did so, slinging it around his shoulders. Tonks let out a little squeak. "Ooh, it is! Oh, Harry, those are rare! And the note said it was from your dad? Really?"

Harry looked down at himself... or, rather, where the rest of his body was *supposed* to have been. As far as he could tell, everything from his shoulders to his feet had vanished under the silky cloak. "Whoa..." Was all the boy could muster as he walked over to a mirror on the other side of the room. Tonks trailed behind him, squatting down at one point and giggling.

"This is weird. I can see right through where your body's supposed to be!" She said, looking 'through' Harry and at her own reflection in the mirror.

"You'd better not let on to anyone you have this." Tonks continued after a moment of thought. "I know a lot of people who'd want their very own invisibility cloak. I'm sure Malfoy would love gettin' his slimy mitts on it if he could."

"Yeah, you're right..." Harry said, pulling the cloak off and carefully folding it up as it had been in the box. As he was putting the top of the box back on, a thought came to him. "Tonks...?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Mrs. Norris can see invisible things?"

It took a moment, but Tonks' eyes lit up brightly. "Ooh! With this and the silencing charms...!"

"Yeah. We could have free rule over the castle at night. Even if Mrs. Norris gets in our way, we could just sneak around her or something." Harry said, grinning. "Maybe now we'll be able to see what's up with Leon. No one's sick for *that* long without a reason for it."

"Yeah... Try not to let him find out about it, alright? For that matter, don't let any of those thickheaded prats in your dorm find out about it. That idiot Terry would probably use it to sneak back into the room with that dog was in." Tonks said, making a face at the memory.

"Don't worry. I'll keep this thing nice and safe..." Harry said, smiling. "Come on, I'm getting hungry. How about you?"

"Now that's a silly question to ask." Came Tonks' reply.

After putting their things away and changing into more casual clothes, (complete with their new sweaters) Harry and Tonks made the walk down to the Great Hall for some breakfast. As they went, Harry asked if they could go somewhere afterwards to have another training session. Tonks, who had all but kissed Harry at the end of November when the boy had turned his eyes a brilliant blue, was all for it.

"The change doesn't feel nearly as weird once you get used to doing it. I don't even notice anymore." Tonks said, hands in the pockets of her jeans. "But yeah, your eyes are gonna feel funny for awhile. I

guess you got a headache that last time 'cause it was the first time you ever did such a good job. You know, I've been thinkin' about a way to spook Malfoy."

"Oh?" Harry asked, interested. "And that would beee...?"

"Well, we wouldn't be able to until you advanced a bit more, but... You know how the git likes sneaking up from behind to try takin' potshots at us?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, what if we both turned our eyes a bright red and spun around to growl at him when we heard him comin' up? He'd probably squeal like a baby an' run off!" Tonks said, smiling sweetly.

"Knowing Malfoy, he'd more likely wet his pants and faint than run off, but... I like. Maybe we could get Fred and George in on the act, too. Have them waiting in the direction we wanted to get Malfoy to bolt down... There are charms to manually change your eye color, aren't there?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, but they're kinda tricky, I think. Mum always told me I'd be a great Auror if I wanted, since I'd end up bein' so good at disguising myself..."

"Auror?"

"Hm? Oh, right... Um, Aurors are kinda like Muggle police. Take down dark wizards, idiots dealin' with illegal stuff... that kinda thing." Tonks explained.

"Ahh..."

"Uh-oh. Don't look now, Harry, but your own personal milksop's downstairs. Looks like he's givin' Hermione what-for, too." Tonks said with a frown as she peered down the main stairway.

"Damn." Harry growled, eyes narrowing. "He's almost as bad as that idiot Malfoy is! I dunno how many times I've warned him to lay off, but..."

"Gonna do something to...'remind' him?" Tonks asked, false innocent dripping in her voice.

"Oh, I certainly am. I know just the thing, too." Harry said, smiling darkly as he rushed down the rest of the stairs.

"*Voco Araneus!*"

Tonks promptly collapsed in a giggle fit.

As Harry had reached the bottom of the stairs, he had drawn his wand and aimed for Ron's head. He then cast a spider-summoning charm and, within a second, a massive spider had landed on Ron's head. Ron, in turn, had let out a shriek like a little girl and ran around, flailing like an idiot, squealing for someone to get it off of him.

As Tonks laughed herself silly, Harry rushed over to Hermione, asking her if she was alright.

"I-I'm fine." Hermione said, voice quiet. "I'm glad you showed up..."

"He hadn't been at it for long, had he?" Harry asked.

"No, he just started before you two showed up." Hermione replied. "You shouldn't have done that." She indicated the still-frantic Weasley. "You aren't supposed to use magic in the halls..."

"It was for a good cause." Tonks said, bounding up and wiping her eyes. "Maybe now he'll knock it off. I've seen Harry summon bigger than *that* thing."

"And what, exactly, is going on out here?" Came a voice from behind Harry, Tonks, and Hermione. Turning, the three saw Dumbledore and McGonagall descending into the Entrance Hall.

"Ron here seemed to need reminding that he shouldn't yell at those different from him, sir." Harry said in his politest voice.

"IT'S CRAWLING DOWN MY SHIRT! GET IT OUUUUUUUUT!" Ron cried, flinging himself backwards against the front doors of the school

in a poor attempt to squash the spider that was now wandering around his back.

"Fred and George told me he didn't like spiders." Harry continued, calmly. "So I summoned one on his head. Perfectly harmless, I assure you. But... I feel it got the job done."

"I dare say it did." Dumbledore said, a twinkle in his eye. The headmaster turned to Ron and, with a short wave of his head, Ron seemed to calm down instantly.

"And I dare say that he's trying my patience!" McGonagall said. The Transfiguration professor stormed across the Entrance Hall and looked down at Ron. "How many times must you be punished before you realize that I will *not* tolerate anyone from my house acting so poorly to another student? Much less one from the same house? I would have thought that cleaning the prefect's bathroom would have taught you a lesson. After you finish eating, meet me in my office."

Finished with giving Ron an earful, McGonagall turned and walked toward Hermione, her demeanor shifting as she did. "Miss Granger, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Professor." Hermione said, eyes downcast.

Looking at her for a few moments, McGonagall eventually nodded, turning her head to look at the pair of Ravenclaws. "Ten points to Ravenclaw for helping a student in need... and five *from* Ravenclaw for using spells when you're not supposed to."

Looking over her shoulder, McGonagall sighed and muttered, "And five points from Gryffindor for being thick-headed. Honestly, Mr. Weasley, I never thought I would say this, but why can you not act more like your older brothers? None of them have given Miss Granger a hard time."

Ron mumbled something under his breath, not meeting his head of house's face.

"Well, now that we have had a show, I believe breakfast is waiting for us all." Said Dumbledore. "Shall we go?"

With Hermione in between them as they went, Harry and Tonks steered their friend into the Great Hall. Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Ron followed, with McGonagall asking Ron what his excuse was *this* time for being so rude.

Ron had mumbled something, to which McGonagall said, "A little louder, Mr. Weasley?"

"I said because she's been spending time with Harry!" Ron said, just loud enough for the pair of Ravenclaws and Hermione to hear him.

"It's none of your business who she spends time with." Tonks said. "Leave her be, you big git."

"That's enough, Miss Tonks." McGonagall said, eyeing the back of Tonks' head. "I can handle Mr. Weasley on my own, thank you."

"Sorry, Professor." Tonks said, making no effort to hide her smile.

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"Thanks a lot, you two! We appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it!"

"Wish we could have seen the bit with the spider."

"It would have been glorious!"

Harry rolled his eyes and waved to Fred and George Weasley as he and Tonks headed back for Ravenclaw Tower. The twins had come down late for breakfast, only to hear the entire story of what had happened to their little brother straight from McGonagall herself. Afterwards, Harry had caught up to the duo and asked if they would help keep 'remind' the other Gryffindors that they shouldn't judge other people. Being who they were, the twins readily agreed, a certain gleam in their eyes. To Harry, it seemed as if they wanted to try that spider summoning hex on anyone who even looked at them funny.

But a pair of guardians were better than none, and the twins escorted Hermione back up to their own tower.

"I think that Ron's obsessed with you, mate." Tonks said, patting her now-full stomach.

"I think you're right." Harry replied, dryly. "Maybe we should have him and that Cho Chang girl face off to see which likes me more."

Tonks snorted.

"What're we gonna do with the rest of the day, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Dunno. We could always play a game of chess or something." Tonks suggested. "I'm pretty bad at it, though. Had a cousin who always tried teaching me how to play, but I'm rubbish at the game. Got some Exploding Snap cards in my trunk, though..."

"We could always start on our new books." Harry suggested, smiling crookedly. Before his friend could try pouting her way out of it, Harry quickly added, "Maybe if I read up a bit more on the subject, my training'll come along faster..."

At this, Tonks' eyes lit up somewhat. "Well, if that's the case, then it's for a good cause! Anything you don't get, just ask me, alright? Haven't read that particular book, but I think I know a thing or two about the subject."

Harry grinned. "Works for me. Even if I am coming along, it's too slow for my liking. Here it is, Christmas, and I can only change my eye color... and even then, only after a lot of concentration. Wish I could do it as fast as you can..."

"Ah, it'll grow on ya." Tonks said, patting Harry on the back. "I was just a natural, I guess. And you had a slow start, anyway. I'm not exactly professor material, ya know."

"I think you've been fine at it so far." Harry said. "The only reason I even managed to change my eyes is because you wouldn't let me give up..."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Ahh, hello, you two. Another Christmas, is it?"

Harry and Tonks looked up, nodding at the portrait guarding the entrance to their house's common room. The old wizard in the painting had several magical snowglobes around his favorite chair. In each, a little wintry scene played out over and over.

"Harry's first *real* Christmas." Tonks replied, looking over at her friend.

"Oh? And why is that?" Walter asked.

"Relative problems." Harry said, making a face. "Let's just say that we've never exactly gotten on famously..."

"That's putting it lightly." Tonks muttered.

"Ah, well. Family is family, in the end." Said the portrait. "You must cherish what you have while you have it. One day you may wake up to find that it is no longer there."

"Wise as ever." Harry said. "Though I don't think I'd miss the Dursleys. Pixydust."

"Indeed." Walter said, his portrait swinging open. "And a Happy Christmas to you both."

Wishing the painting a good day, Harry and Tonks ran back through the pathway and into the common room. A few students were puttering about here and there, most still in their pajamas. As usual, Harry headed for his chair, Tonks following behind him.

"Wonder what McGonagall's gonna do with Ron." Tonks wondered aloud a moment later as she got comfortable on the chair's arm.

"Maybe she'll grow a sense of humor and make him spend the rest of the day trying to fill Filch with Christmas cheer." Harry said.

"Oh, I'd love to see that..." Tonks giggled. "Can you imagine that old crab walking around with ornaments dangling on his robes and singing Christmas carols?"

Snorting, Harry shook his head and grabbed his new book on Metamorphmagi. "I think if I did, I'd either die laughing or gape in abject horror."

"'Abject horror'? Oi, enough big words." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "I either need to start reading as much as you to get my own vocabulary up there with yours... or I need to carry a dictionary around with me."

"Sorry. Come on, let's settle down and spend the rest of the morning going through our books." Harry said, wiggling back against the chair to get comfy.

"And if we *both* space out and no one snaps us out of it for lunch?" Tonks asked, picking up the book Harry had gotten her.

"I'll conjure up some apples for us to eat on the way down, then. I've gotten good at that. Wish I could conjure up something other than apples, though... I'm getting a bit sick of them, truthfully. Maybe I should look around the library for food conjuring charms." Harry said, tilting his head slightly.

"Or you could just ask Professor Flitwick." Tonks said, raising an eyebrow down at Harry, who had the grace to blush a little.

"I would've done that eventually." He muttered.

Tonks patted Harry lightly on the head. "Of course you would."

"Oi, knock it off!" Harry said, swatting playfully at Tonks' hand. "...You know, as long as I'm going to look into making food pop out of thin air, is there anything small that you'd like me to learn to conjure? Wouldn't hurt if we could both get something we actually really liked when we were hungry and late for a meal..."

Tonks leaned back in thought. "Hmm... Well, I like sucking on a lemon once in awhile..."

"A lemon? You have to be kidding!" Harry exclaimed.

"Why? I like the sour flavor!" Tonks said, puffing up.

"Yeah, but still! You like making faces from actually biting into one?"

"I'm all about making faces, Harry." Tonks replied, dryly. "Or haven't you figured that out yet? Bit slow on the draw, are we?"

Harry glared at her. "Oh, be quiet." He mumbled, flipping open his book. As Harry began to read, Tonks grinned down at him, then looked up to see a handful of the other Ravenclaws present staring at them with odd looks on their faces.

"Oi, shove off! Gonna watch us read all morning?" Said Tonks, making a dismissing gesture with her free hand. "Honestly, some people..."

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"I really hate this weather." Harry muttered to himself as he gazed out a corridor that was open to the outside. It was painfully cold and snow was lazily falling, melting when it drifted into the corridor and touched the stone floor.

It was past curfew now - almost midnight, in fact. But wanderlust had struck Harry and, as something in his mind wouldn't let him sleep, he decided to roam the castle to clear his head. He had been out of the Tower for at least half an hour and so far the stroll wasn't helping as much as he had hoped.

He had a few simple silencing charms cast over him. He had also decided that it was as good a time as any to test out the invisibility cloak he had received that morning. It felt weird knowing that, unless there was some way of detecting the invisible, no one would find him out. Not unless he did something stupid, like bump into someone, anyway.

After another half hour, Harry was wandering around a hallway he didn't quite recognize. A door was slightly ajar from the other end, however, which was what caught his attention to begin with. Moving

towards it, Harry could see a faint light coming from within, along with voices speaking in hushed tones.

Drawing as close as he dared without running the risk of having someone come out and plow right into him, Harry pressed up against the wall and listened.

"...--estly don't believe him sometimes!" -- That voice was Professor McGonagall's. She sounds rather exasperated.

"What did he do?" Came a squeaky voice that could only belong to Professor Flitwick.

"Well," McGonagall said. "You know how Hagrid likes his mead. He got more than a little drunk and began singing Christmas carols at the top of his lungs!"

"Is that what I heard this evening?" Flitwick asked.

"Most likely." McGonagall said. "And you know that Hagrid's never been able to keep a secret very well. Albus just doesn't seem to understand that fact. Hagrid means well, of course, but he'll tell you anything when he's drunk."

"And that is when he began spewing about information on Flamel?" Came a new, third voice. This time, it was Snape's icy tone that filled the calm night air.

"Indeed." McGonagall replied with a sigh. "He said this and that, telling anyone within range that Dumbledore always trusted him with special assignments - going after Harry Potter, going to Gringott's for him... Well, he just so happened to start mentioning Nicolas to a nearby witch, who looked as though she were about to turn and bolt at any moment."

"Idiot!" Snape hissed. "If he's to be allowed out to roam Hogsmeade on his own like that, he shouldn't be allowed to imbibe anything that might render his judgment even worse than it normally is!"

"Now now, Severus, you mustn't be so harsh." McGonagall said. "We all make our mistakes now and again. You, above all, should know that."

There was a pause in the conversation before Flitwick spoke up.

"So... then what happened, Minerva?"

"Ah, yes... Well, as I said, he began speaking of Nicolas and Gringott's and almost said what he brought back to Hogwarts with him. It was all I could do to silence him... and that was no easy task, I assure you. I called for Albus in the fire after that. He managed to sober Hagrid up and we headed back for the castle."

"Did Albus say anything to Hagrid on the way?" Flitwick asked.

"Only that he should be more careful in the future." McGonagall said. "I tried to speak up, but you know how Albus can be. If he wants the final word, he'll get it one way or another."

There was another pause in the conversation. Finally, Professor Snape spoke up. "As much as I would love to continue speaking about our resident drunkard, I should get back to the dungeons. I still have essays from my first and second-year Slytherins to mark. Good night,
Minerva, Filius."

"Good night, Severus." Came McGonagall's and Flitwick's voices.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath and pressed himself flat against the wall, breathing as softly and shallowly as he could manage. Moments later, the door to the room was pulled open and the Potions Master slipped out, closing it behind him. For a moment, the man seemed to pause. Brow creased, Snape looked up the hallway, then down it.

Muttering something under his breath, Snape began gliding down the hall, shaking his head slightly as he went. Harry thought he heard the man mention something about being overly paranoid.

Once he was sure that he wasn't going to get spotted - not that it would be an easy task, mind - he started back towards Ravenclaw

Tower as fast as he dared. He didn't want the cloak to slip off or begin billowing enough to expose a shoe. When he reached Walter's portrait, he whispered the password and slipped inside while the old wizard was still too groggy to work out what was going on.

Harry slipped his cloak off quickly once he surveyed the room to make sure that no one would see him. Folding it up, Harry quickly drew his wand and removed the silencing charms he had activated before sneaking out. Quietly making his way back to the first years' dorm, Harry entered and put his cloak away in his trunk.

As he started changing into his pajamas, Harry couldn't help but wonder just what on earth the professors had been talking about. He knew that many of them also took the holidays off, but he had never really put much thought into it.

And what were they talking about? It seemed as if Hagrid, in his drunken state, had begun speaking of a man. Assuming the man hadn't been named strangely, the name had been 'Nicolas Flamel,' if Harry had heard correctly. What was so important about Nicolas Flamel that would require McGonagall to silence Hagrid and then call for Dumbledore himself?

Climbing into bed, Harry's brain began working out what he knew so far. One, Hagrid had gotten something from Gringott's. Thinking back, Harry remembered running into the large man (almost literally) down in the tunnels when he had first travelled to Diagon Alley. At the time, Hagrid had mentioned being there on business from Dumbledore. Whatever it was, it wasn't to be told to anyone, since he had said it was a secret.

Two, Hagrid had let slip Flamel's name in Hogsmeade - whatever that was. Probably a pub or something, Harry figured. In any case, the name was enough to warrant a silencing and a call to the headmaster. Therefore, Nicolas Flamel probably had something to do with whatever Hagrid had retrieved from Gringott's.

Three, there was a massive, three-headed dog in the third-floor corridor. A dog that, as Harry had learned, had never been there

before that year. Ergo, logic dictated that whatever Hagrid had gotten out of Gringott's was most likely being guarded by the giant beast.

That left only one question - just what was the object in question?

As this question lingered in his mind, Harry felt himself being slowly embraced by sleep. Thinking that he would have to run a few things by Tonks when they were both up the next day, Harry let his eyes slid shut. Within seconds, he was fast asleep.

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Author's Notes: And there we have our Retransmuted version of Christmas! You know, I didn't realize until I started the bit where Harry was roaming at night, but I completely forgot to include the discovery of the invisibility cloak! So I went back and stuck the scene in at a spot I felt it would fit best.

And there, folks, is the plot! Took me long enough to get around to it, huh? As I started the bit with the teacher's lounge, things just sort of flowed. And, with Harry being in Ravenclaw and thus being a bit quicker on the draw than a Gryffindor!Harry or a Slytherin!Harry might be, he began piecing the puzzle together as soon as he could.

The hunt for Flamel begins next chapter! Leon will return, a certain Quidditch incident will take place, and Harry gets pushed over the edge by a certain Weasley boy. What does he do to get Harry so angry? Well, you'll have to come back and check for yourselves, because I'm not saying a word!

Chapter 20 – What We Can't Have

"And it's Lynch to Allenby, Allenby back to Lynch, Lynch passes to Tracer! She shoots, Ravenclaw scores! Good teamwork from the Ravenclaw Chasers and an especially good shot from Melissa Tracer! That brings the total to 90-80 with Slytherin in the lead by a mere 10 points!"

Harry swung around in midair, scowling down at the Slytherins below him. Despite their best efforts in the first match of the new year, they weren't playing up to their usual standard. It didn't help that the Slytherin Keeper, who Harry only knew as 'Bletchley,' was huge for his age. It made for blocking the goals all the easier.

Terence Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker, was no threat. Three times, the boy thought he had seen the snitch and, three times, it had been something else. Harry, meanwhile, had made slow sweeps of the field, eyes darting around and only getting distracted when a bludger or two was sent in his direction.

As it stood, however, Slytherin's Beaters were having a hard-enough time trying to keep Ravenclaw's Chasers from getting down the field. Tracer, Lynch, and Allenby were a true force to be reckoned with when they were in top form - the holidays obviously hadn't lessened their skills.

The game had been going for nearly an hour, however, and Harry was starting to get frustrated. Something about the game just didn't feel right, though Harry was unsure of just *why*.

Pushing his glasses up on his nose and scowling as the sharp winds made his eyes water, Harry resumed searching for the Snitch. It took almost a full minute, but he eventually noticed a glimmer from near the Hufflepuff stands. Terence Higgs was off on the other side of the pitch, avoiding the bludgers that Ellie Shott and Timothy Ratchett, Ravenclaw's Beaters, were hitting at him.

Leaning forward, Harry sent his broom sailing towards the golden orb, which took off in the other direction as Harry drew near. Harry spun around and took off after it. Shouting something to Ratchett as he

soared past, Harry veered upward when the snitch did, shooting higher into the sky over the pitch.

He was slowly gaining on it. Reaching out with his right hand, Harry leaned forward on his broom, fingers flexing as they came within inches of grasping the golden object.

But then, something happened. Harry's broom jerked suddenly and levelled out, sending Harry flying over the front. Thankfully, he had been holding onto the broom tightly with the hand not grabbing for the snitch. He was still holding on after the broom sent him flying over the front, but only just. Quickly, he reached up and grabbed the broom with his other hand, but something was definitely wrong.

His broom began spinning and bucking wildly, as if it were specifically trying to get Harry to let go and fall. But Harry's grip was as strong as it ever was, and he held fast to the broom. Harry tried climbing back onto it at one point, but it was no use - the broom was just moving too wildly to get under control.

Knowing he shouldn't, but unable to help it, Harry looked down quickly. He was way too far from the ground, he realized. A fall from this height would almost assuredly be death - a very painful one, at that. Had he survived a dark wizard attack as a baby, then survived eleven years of abuse from the Dursleys only to fall to his death in a game?

His broom gave a quick flick to one side, nearly sending Harry slipping off the front. One hand came loose, causing Harry to gasp and move as fast as he could to slide back down the broom again. Shutting his eyes tightly, Harry couldn't help but see the Tonks' face, staring down at his broken, crumpled body...

Whether it was an outright miracle or whether it was his own will that caused the broom to stabilize, Harry didn't know. But when it did stop jerking and swirling about, it took the boy a minute to realize that he was as safe as he had been before it had started malfunctioning.

Quickly getting back on, Harry's mind instantly went back to searching for the snitch. Whatever had happened to him could wait until after the game... or until the broom started acting up again. As

Harry went into a dive to bring him closer to the ground, he began to hear the laughter and pointing coming from the Slytherin stands. Adrian Pucey, one of Slytherin's Chasers, sneered at Harry as he flew by, catching the quaffle as it was passed to him.

Terence Higgs seemed to find Harry's near-death experience rather hilarious, as he was floating in place and laughing his head off.

Harry started to glare at the boy, then noticed a shimmer come from just underneath the Slytherin Seeker. With an evil grin, Harry tilted forward and shot towards Higgs, who looked confused for a moment before he let out a yelp and shot straight up, cursing at Harry for what he assumed to be an attempt to ram him. Only when Higgs looked back down did the cheer shoot out from the Ravenclaw stands. Eyes widening in shock, Higgs' shoulders slumped - Harry Potter had just grabbed the snitch.

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"What the hell happened?!" Lynch roared as the Quidditch team, along with a handful of their housemates who had attended, were on their way back to Ravenclaw Tower. "Potter nearly got himself killed out there!"

Tonks and Solieyu looked at one another. Nodding, they each grabbed one of Harry's arms to hold him back. The rest of the team and students, paying attention to Lynch's ranting, didn't notice them slip into an empty classroom.

"Oi, what're you two doing?" Harry asked.

"We know what happened to your broom!" Tonks said.

"What?"

"It seemed to be Professor Snape." Solieyu said, looking off at the wall. "He was staring at you the entire time and seemed to be muttering to himself."

"What?!" Said Harry again, this time a little louder.

"I know a jinx when I see one." Solieyu continued, eyes narrowed slightly. "He wasn't blinking at all... and one needs to keep eye contact with the target..."

"I saw Hermione and the twins looking between you and us... I motioned towards the greasy git an' mouthed his name. They seemed to get the message, because Hermione vanished and a few minutes later, Snape's robes nearly caught on fire!" Tonks said, excitedly.

"That was when your broom returned to normal." Solieyu added.

"Great..." Harry said, his legs giving out slightly, causing him to slump back against the wall. "I knew he hated me... but I didn't think he'd go so far as to try killing me..."

"There has to be something deeper than this..." Solieyu said, sighing. "Why would a Hogwarts professor try to kill a student?"

"Maybe it has something to do with that dog on the third floor." Tonks said before she realized what she was saying.

Solieyu rounded on her, an eyebrow raised. "Giant dog? When were you on the third floor corridor?"

Tonks let out an almost inaudible squeak, looking quickly to Harry once. "Um..."

"We got curious one night." Harry said, shrugging. "It was a stupid thing for us to do, I'll admit... There was a huge, three-headed dog in a room at the end of the corridor..."

Solieyu looked at Harry, then Tonks, brow creasing as his mind began wandering.

"That reminds me, though... I was out one night before the Christmas holiday was over with. I overheard a conversation in the teacher's lounge..."

Harry repeated what he had overheard to his friends, who silently took this information in. When Harry was done, though, Tonks' eyes went wide.

"Harry... Remember what that idiot Terry was going on about that night once we had gotten back?" She asked.

"I try not to think about *anything* Terry says, Tonks." Harry said, shaking his head. "He gives me a headache."

"He said he thought the dog was on a trapdoor... and that he thought it was guarding something!" Tonks said, animatedly, making wild hand gestures as she spoke.

Harry crossed his arms. "So... The dog is on a trapdoor. There's something being guarded. Hagrid got whatever it is and brought it back here for some reason. Snape wants it, because we saw him limp by that day with his robes all torn up... and a man named Nicolas Flamel has something to do with it all... does that name ring any bells with either of you?"

"Not me." Tonks said.

"Not with me, either..." Solieyu said.

Scowling, Harry closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples, trying to work out just what was going on. "I want to say it sounds familiar, like I've heard it somewhere before...I just don't know *where*. It's been driving me crazy since I heard it."

"Well, maybe we should head to the library... see if we can't find any information on this Flamel person." Solieyu suggested.

"It couldn't hurt." Harry said, nodding slowly. "I don't know where we'd begin to look, though."

"There can't be *that* many books on famous wizards. At least, not many from recent times. There haven't been very many really powerful wizards this century." Solieyu said, opening the door and leading the other two back out into the hall.

Tonks scowled. "Well, huzzah. We *could* be back in the common room, partying over a victory well deserved. Instead, we're going to go to the library to slave over who knows how many books in search of this Flamel character. Not the way I envisioned the rest of my day playing out."

Harry laughed, patting Tonks on the back. "Sorry, Tonks. We'll play some Exploding Snap or something once we get back to the common room, alright? I promise we won't spend more than two hours searching."

"Well... alright. But I'm gonna keep an eye on the time." Tonks said. "It's only a few hours 'til supper, after all. Snape or no Snape, I'm not missing dinner because he's trying to get past that dog."

"Agreed." Said Harry. "I'm just happy I didn't lose my *lunch* while I was being thrown about."

"I think we're all happy about that." Tonks said. "But it might not've been that bad if you had. Mighta nailed that stupid sod Higgs right in the face!"

"Eww, Tonks! That's gross." Harry groaned.

"Yes. Yes, it is." The girl said, grinning.

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The group spent the next few hours searching the library for any information that might pertain to Nicolas Flamel. As the final meal of the day approached, all three Ravenclaws were growing more than a little tired.

"Come on," Harry finally said. "Let's put everything up and get down to the Great Hall. If we don't get going now, we'll miss it."

Tonks groaned.

"Well," Solieyu said, rubbing his chin slowly as the three left the library and began the trek downstairs, "Whoever this Flamel person is, he's nobody new in the various fields of magic."

"Yeah, we may as well have pulled books out, blindfolded... we didn't get anywhere." Harry said, shaking his head. "I *KNOW* I've heard his name somewhere before, though... We're not doing very good."

"We could be doing worse." Tonks said, hands in her pockets. "At least we *have* a name to go on. Oi, do you think Quirrell might have something to do with it? I mean, we did hear those two arguing about something back at the start of term, didn't we?"

Harry's brow creased, trying to force his memory to recollect the event. "Yeah... Yeah, we did..." He said, frowning. "And he seems to get glared at by Snape an awful lot, now that I think about it. Maybe he knows something..."

"And Snape wants to get the information out of him?" Solieyu finished.

"Exactly..." Harry said. "But that still doesn't tell us what's being guarded. Hell, I'm all out of ideas - let's ask the twins."

Once in the Great Hall, Harry excused himself and left Tonks and Solieyu, walking to the Gryffindor table. Fred and George were sitting halfway down it, laughing with Lee Jordan about something or another.

"Fred! George!" Harry called to them.

The twins looked up, blinked in unison, then broke out into grins once more. "Harry!" They called back.

"Hey, you two... I need some help and I'm not sure who else to turn to. You're the only two older students that I know can keep a secret" Harry said, keeping his voice low as he leaned over between the two redheads.

"What's up?" George asked.

"Have either of you heard of a Nicolas Flamel?" Harry asked.

"Flamel, Flamel..." Fred repeated quietly, head tilting to one side. "Blimey, now why does that name sound familiar...?"

"Glad to know it isn't just me." Harry muttered.

"Dunno, Harry." The two said as one.

"Lee, what about you? You ever heard of Nicolas Flamel?" Fred asked, looking across the table.

Lee raised an eyebrow. "No, can't say as I have..."

"Tell ya what, mate..." Fred began. "We'll keep an ear out - tell ya if we hear his name come up, alright?"

Harry nodded. "Well, thanks anyway, guys. I guess it's back to the library after dinner, as well."

"A fate worse than death!" George cried as Harry headed off towards his own house's table. When he got there, he slumped down next to Tonks, who was next to Solieyu.

"Well?" Tonks asked, mouth partially stuffed with a bit of pie.

"Nothing." Harry said in a weary tone. "I'm going back to the library after dinner. I'm never going to get to sleep if I can't work it out."

"Would you like some help?" Solieyu asked. "I haven't got anything planned for the night."

Harry nodded. "If you feel like doing the same thing we did most of the afternoon."

"Count me out." Said Tonks, swallowing the food in her mouth. "I've had more than enough reading for one day. I'm still new at this. My eyes get tired easier than yours do."

Harry smiled. "Alright. You can go and relax in the Tower, then. We'll let you know if we hit anything useful."

"It's a plan."

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Though the trio had a basic plan laid out, it didn't mean that they would get any further than they had in the afternoon. In fact, Harry was slowly realizing that they were going to run out of books on famous wizards of the 20th century. Harry voiced this to Solieyu, who went to do a check for himself.

"It seems you're right." He said, sitting back down next to Harry. "Maybe he's a practitioner of the Dark Arts... That would explain his lack of an entry anywhere."

"Ugh... I really don't want to have to ask a professor for permission into the restricted section." Harry groaned. "Maybe I should just give in and ask Quirrell..."

"That would take hours." Solieyu replied.

"And this isn't?"

"Touché."

Leaning back in his chair, Harry stared up at the ceiling of the library, losing himself in thought. Whoever this Flamel man was, he was making himself incredibly hard to research. There *had* to be a reason for it. If there was something valuable enough to be kept in a wizarding school, guarded by a monstrous dog, it had to be special. And the owner *must* have been well known.

"Leon?" Harry drawled out after bringing himself out of his thoughts.

"Mm?"

"What if Flamel isn't a proper wizard at all?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well... I mean, what if he were a squib or something?" Harry asked. During the summer, Tonks had told Harry of the various 'types' of wizards that existed.

"I don't think so, Harry." Solieyu said. "He'd need an active magical core to deal with magical objects properly. And if what's hidden is,

indeed, valuable... then I would assume it's a very powerful item. No, I don't think Flamel would be a squib."

"I suppose that's true... But still, I think I'm onto something here. If he were famous, surely we would have found him by now, right? I dunno... maybe he's a werewolf or something. They aren't treated very well in the wizarding world, are they?" Harry said, looking aside to his friend.

"They aren't." Solieyu said. "Most wizards have an archaic view on what they deem to be 'dark creatures'... and while some certainly can be classified as such, I don't see the point in exiling someone who's perfectly normal 90 of the month..."

"Even so... if he were a 'dark creatures,' then I doubt he'd be in any of these books." Harry said. "Maybe I'm grasping at straws, I just don't know..."

"It's getting late, Harry. We should head back to the Tower." Solieyu said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "We can come back again tomorrow. I must admit, you've got me curious as to the identity of Mr. Flamel now..."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's call it a night."

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After everyone else had turned in for the night, Harry still lay awake in bed. His mind was working too constantly to allow him to drift off. With a sigh, he decided to do the same thing he always did whenever he needed to clear his head - he grabbed his invisibility cloak, cast a few silencing spells on himself, and snuck out of the Tower. Perhaps, he thought, the answer would come to him as he walked.

It was almost eerie walking around the castle at night. Save for the occasional prefect or professor out, it seemed outright empty. Harry had never traveled very far from the Tower after the incident with Mrs. Norris... But tonight, Harry's mind just wouldn't let the Flamel issue drop.

Harry's mind worked over and over on why Flamel wouldn't be in any books on famous wizards of the 20th century. He wasn't paying attention to where his feet were taking him, either. It wasn't until he realized that he had entered a room that he snapped to his senses once more. The room was dark, save for the hint of moonlight that shone through the windows that lined one wall. It was also empty, save for one object that stood in nearly the center - a mirror.

Feeling compelled, though unsure of why, Harry walked towards the mirror. It looked quite old - Harry was used to seeing ancient-looking things at Hogwarts - and it had an inscription carved around the top.

"...Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi? The devil does that mean?" Harry murmured, bringing a hand out from under his cloak to feel along the side of the mirror.

Stepping in front of it, all Harry saw at first was his disembodied arm. Harry had never looked in a mirror while he had his cloak on and found his floating arm to be rather amusing. That is, until people started appearing in the reflection. Quickly, Harry pulled his arm back under his cloak, for all the good it would do him at this point.

He spun around, only to be faced with an empty room. Frowning, Harry tugged the cloak off and looked back into the mirror. Once more, people were walking and speaking to one another in the reflection. Harry blinked, but when he did, he found two more people had arrived. Standing behind him on either side were a man and a woman. The man had dark, unruly hair and wore glasses. The woman had fiery red hair and had brilliantly-green eyes.

The cloak slipped from Harry's hand, pooling to the floor at his feet.

Harry spun around again, but once more was met with little more than an old, dusty, and quite empty room. His head slowly turned to gaze back into the mirror. The man and woman were still there, still behind him... only they weren't. No one in the reflection was in the room, save for Harry.

So Harry did the only thing he could; he watched. The man and woman didn't do very much, aside from smile and wave occasionally.

The man had put a hand on Harry's shoulder, though Harry never felt anything. It didn't take him very long to realize who they were, either. Though he had never seen a single picture of either of his parents before, how could these two be anything but?

Harry closed his eyes and took a slow, unsteady breath. He would not break down while at Hogwarts. He would not cry while he was out after bedtime. He especially would not cry while staring into an oddity of a mirror.

What seemed like hours passed before Harry's eyes began growing heavy. He wasn't sure what time it was, though it seemed to almost be growing light outside. Figuring he should wrench himself away before anyone woke up to find him missing, Harry grabbed his cloak, mouthed a goodbye to his parents, and swept out of the room before he could change his mind.

A few nights later, Tonks came along with him. He had told her all about the mirror during one of their reading sessions on Harry's chair in the common room. She had been intrigued, so he promised to show her. He wouldn't have said anything at all, had she not called him on seeming gloomier than usual.

"There it is." Harry whispered as they entered the room containing the mirror. "Go on, go look in... Mum and dad been there every time I've looked in..."

"You really saw your parents?" Tonks asked, keeping her voice low, as well.

"Yeah... they're always standing right behind me... and there are a lot of other people, too. I guess they're my relatives or something, since I saw a lot of people with hair like mine..." Harry said, draping the cloak over his right shoulder.

Tonks walked up to the mirror, gazing briefly up at the inscription before looking at her reflection. Like Harry, she seemed almost mesmerized at what greeted her.

"Can you seem them?" Harry asked, quickly.

"N-No, not really..." Tonks said after a moment.

Harry frowned. "What do you mean, 'not really'? What do you see, then?"

"I... Well, I see *me*... Only I'm older. And I had pink hair. And a cuter nose. ...Wow, puberty's gonna be nice to me. I think. I keep changing shapes. One minute I'm *me*...the next, I turn into somebody else, then back again." Tonks said slowly. "There's other stuff, too. I keep seeing myself curled up in a blanket somewhere, but I can't tell where... everything around me is really hazy."

Harry walked over and peered over Tonks' shoulder. But again, all he saw were his parents and other relations behind him. "...I still see my mum and dad." He said. "...I wonder what this mirror is. You seeing anything else, Tonks? ...Tonks?"

Tonks was blushing a rather bright shade of red, though Harry wasn't entirely sure why.

"Um... Tonks, you okay? Tonks? ...Oi, *NYMMY*."

Tonks turned and glared at Harry. "Don't call me Nymmy!"

"Couldn't think of any other way to get your attention." Harry said, eyebrows raised. "What were you blushing at?"

"Huh? ...I dunno what you're talkin' about. Wasn't blushing at anything." Tonks said, thickly.

"Yes you were. I saw you!"

"You're seein' things, then." Tonks said, pulling herself away from the mirror. "And I think I might have been, too..."

"You alright?" Harry asked.

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm fine. Can we get back now? I'm gettin' kinda tired..."

Blinking, Harry nodded, pulling his cloak from his shoulder and wrapping it around the two of them.

The whole trip back to Ravenclaw Tower felt awkward to Harry. Tonks was keeping very quiet which, despite the need to keep from being heard, was still odd. Tonks had whispered questions to Harry for most of the trip to the mirror, after all. Why she had suddenly fallen silent was anybody's guess. Harry assumed it had something to do with what she had seen in the mirror's reflection, but he didn't want to seem rude by asking her.

"I'm gonna go back for a bit, alright?" Harry murmured once they had gotten back to Walter's portrait. "I... I just wanna be with mum and dad a bit longer..."

"Alright..." Tonks said in an equally-soft voice.

Harry pulled the cloak off to allow Tonks an easy exit. He also spoke the password to Walter, who swung open groggily. Tonks, however, was not walking through the pathway to the common room.

"Tonks?"

The girl looked up at Harry. For a few moments, the two stood and did little more than stare at one another. Tonks broke eye contact first, looking off with slightly-colored cheeks. She shook her head finally, murmuring, "I'm alright. Go on... just be careful, alright?"

"Alright... You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine..." Tonks said. Before she turned to walk back in, however, she stepped forward and threw her arms around Harry. Confused, Harry was about to ask what she was doing... but was stopped when she moved her head up to kiss him quickly on the cheek. Her arms unwrapped from around his body then and she took a few steps back, still looking at him oddly. Tilting her head slightly, she turned and, without a single word of explanation, ran off and into the Tower, leaving behind one very confused young man.

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"I wish you two could talk." Harry said with a sigh as he gazed at his mother and father in the mirror after his return to the room. "I could really use some advice right now... I may not be the brightest student here, but I'd like to think I know my fair share. But I don't think I'll ever figure girls out..."

The whole way back, Harry had replayed what had just happened over and over in his mind. So lost in thought was he that he almost ran right into Percy Weasley, one of the Gryffindor prefects.

It had been a close call, and Harry needed as few of those as possible, so he tried keeping his thoughts away from Tonks until he was safely back into the mirror's room.

"Back again, I see..."

Harry jumped. He had been sitting on the floor, crosslegged, in front of the mirror. Mainly because he had become lost in thought again. He turned around to see a familiar old wizard walking silently across the room towards him.

"W-When did you get here?" Harry asked. "I...didn't hear you coming."

"Few would." Said one Albus Dumbledore, walking up to stand beside Harry, who had quickly gotten to his feet again. "So... I see that you, like countless others, have discovered the wonders that lie within the Mirror of Erised."

"Is that what it's called?" Harry said.

"Indeed it is. And, by now, I expect you've realized what it does?" Said Dumbledore, looking down his nose at Harry and smiling.

"I think I have... It shows me my family...but it showed Tonks older than she was. It can't be showing the future because... well.. all my family's dead." Harry said, eyes downcast.

"Ah, yes... Miss Tonks seemed to be quite interested in what she saw..." Dumbledore said, nodding slowly.

"You were here earlier?"

"Indeed I was..."

"But... But I didn't see you..."

"Not all of us require a cloak to become invisible." Said Dumbledore, a twinkle in his eyes. "Now... think, Harry - what is it that the Mirror shows us?"

"...I'm not entirely sure, to be honest." Harry said, sighing.

"Let me give you a hint then, if I may..." Dumbledore said, bringing his arms around behind him as he looked towards the Mirror. "The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror like a normal mirror. He would look into it, seeing nothing but his own reflection. Do you see now?"

Harry's face screwed up slightly as he pulled himself into thought. "I... think so." He finally said. "It shows us what he really want, doesn't it?"

"It shows us," Dumbledore began, "nothing but the deepest desires of our hearts. You have never known any family, outside of your aunt, uncle, and cousin... so, naturally, the Mirror showed you various members of your family...Including Lily and James, I believe?"

Harry nodded.

"You must be careful, Harry." Dumbledore said, putting a hand on Harry's back. "Men have wasted away in front of the Mirror...or driven mad, not knowing if what they see is real... or even possible. Tomorrow, I plan to move the Mirror elsewhere. And I only ask that you don't go searching for it again. Can you promise me that?"

Harry nodded. "I won't look for it again, Professor... ...and I'm sorry for being out so late..."

Dumbledore smiled, patting Harry's back lightly. "Quite alright. If memory serves, your father was prone to sneaking out when he wasn't supposed to, as well."

Harry turned to leave then, smiling faintly at the thought of his father sneaking around the castle like he had been doing. As he started to put on the cloak, however, a question entered his mind. Looking over his shoulder, he asked, "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"I believe you just have. However, feel free to ask another."

"What do *you* see when you look into the Mirror?"

Dumbledore blinked. "I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "...Socks, sir?"

"One can never have too many pairs of socks." Said the headmaster, the twinkle in his eyes returning. "Now then... I believe it is well past midnight..."

Harry nodded. "Right... goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Harry."

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Almost a week had passed ever since Harry's final visit to the Mirror of Erised. Ever since, Tonks had been rather quiet around him. Harry had asked Solieyu if he knew why she was acting so unlike herself, but the other boy wasn't sure, either.

Harry had since told Solieyu about the Mirror, as well, and apologized for not being able to take him to see for himself. Solieyu dismissed the idea with a wave, saying that it wouldn't have done him any good, anyway.

The Charms class that Harry was currently in only had a few minutes left, and Professor Flitwick usually let his students use these last few minutes however they wished, so long as it wasn't disruptive. Though

he hadn't voiced it much, Harry liked the little wizard that was head of his house. Harry had often seen Flitwick pop into the common room from time to time, sitting down to talk with various students about this and that. He had even seen the man comfort a student of two every so often.

He was certainly the nicest of the four house heads. Professor McGonagall seemed almost like a vulture to Harry, at times. Professor Sprout, while nice enough, didn't seem very easy to approach. And it was no secret that Harry had no kind words for Professor Snape.

No progress had been made in finding out who Nicolas Flamel was, either. Harry and Solieyu often retreated to the library on their own, since Tonks had gotten so quiet lately. Harry was beginning to wonder whether he really should try asking Professor Flitwick if he could look into the restricted section. He had pondered sneaking in under his invisibility cloak, but it seemed almost too easy. Harry wasn't sure if there were any warning spells on the entrance to the off-limits area, but he wasn't willing to risk getting zapped to find out.

"--rry? Hey, Harry...come on, snap out of it."

Harry blinked. "Huh?"

Solieyu had been shaking him, apparently, to try and get his attention. They were the only two left in class - everyone else had filed out moments earlier. "I said it's time to go. Shall we head back to the library?"

Harry collected his quill and parchment and shook his head, getting to his feet. "It's no use. I think I may as well ask Professor Flitwick if I can get a pass for the restricted section. I doubt it would work, but..."

"Yes, it would seem we're running out of books to check." Solieyu said as the two strolled out of the Charms classroom. "Down to lunch, then?"

"Sounds good to m--" Harry cut himself off, frowning.

"...Something wrong?"

"I thought I just heard something." Harry said.

"From where?" Solieyu asked, looking around and frowning.

"Down that way..." Harry said, pointing off down an empty corridor.
"Come on... I think it might have been someone yelling."

The two boys walked quickly down the hallway, listening close for any further noise. None came, but the two still decided to investigate a bit better. For all they knew, it could have been Peeves flinging water balloons at students again. He liked doing that, after all.

It wasn't until Harry saw Solieyu tense visibly that he knew something wasn't right. His breathing shallow now, Harry murmured, "What is it?"

"I know what's going on." Solieyu said, something odd in his voice.
"...Third room coming up on the left. Quickly!"

Solieyu took off running. Harry, who had gotten used to his friend's odd ability to seemingly know what was going on, took off after him. Solieyu got to the door to the room first, slinging it open with enough force to make it '*BANG!*' against the wall.

'For someone who looks so tired all the time,' Harry thought as he hurried to catch up, *'he's sure fast!'*

Solieyu had already charged into the room and by the time Harry skidded to a halt in the doorway, he knew why. A beam of orange light had just sailed out, barely missing his right ear by inches. Drawing his wand, Harry looked into the room and saw two things.

One, Tonks was leaning up against the far wall. One of her eyes looked really puffy and the area surrounding it was all dark. She was also holding her left elbow with her right hand. Harry could see a small trickle of blood making its way down her arm.

Two, Harry saw Solieyu slinging spells at the person who had apparently hurt Tonks - Ron Weasley.

Harry's eyes went back and forth between Ron and Tonks. Tonks looked as if she had been crying and Ron... well, Ron was too busy avoiding being cursed by Solieyu, who looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him before.

He walked into the room slowly, completely ignoring the fight going on as he made his way over to Tonks. Reaching out, he placed a hand on the arm that wasn't injured. She looked up at him through her good eye. Her breathing was erratic, he noticed, and she seemed rather cold.

Harry's eyes moved from Tonks to Ron, then back again. She nodded once, then looked down at the floor.

"Leon."

Harry's voice caused the impromptu duel to cease, a beam of grey light hitting the ceiling and causing it to grow boils. Ron and Solieyu both looked at Harry, though they kept one eye on each other, as well.

"Take Tonks to the hospital wing, then go get a professor." Harry said.

"What about **HIM**?" Solieyu growled, jerking a thumb in Ron's direction.

"I'll handle him." Harry said.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Hurry."

Solieyu backed away from Ron, heading for Harry and Tonks, though he kept his wand trained on the redhead. Once he had reached them, Solieyu murmured, "Can you walk?"

Tonks nodded.

"Come on, then. Harry... be careful."

"I will. Just move as quick as you can." Harry said, still looking at Ron.

"Right. Come on, Tonks. Let's go get you fixed up." Solieyu said, taking one of Tonks' hands and tugging her from the room.

Once they were gone, Harry raised his own wand at Ron. Advancing slowly, Harry's voice growled out, "What on earth is wrong with you, Weasley?"

Ron snapped out of his trance instantly, raising his wand, as well. "Nothing's wrong with *me*! It's *you* that's got something wrong with him!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yeah, I bet you don't!" Ron snapped. "You never know what's going on, do you?! You never look around and see what you've got!"

"Either tell me what you're talking about or start fighting." Harry said.

Harry continued approaching Ron, who was backing away slowly. The two were moving in a slow circle around the room, neither lowering their wands an inch.

"Open your eyes! You're rich! You're famous! But you still act like you're nothing special! What's *wrong* with you?! Haven't you noticed how everyone treats you?!" Ron yelled.

"I never asked for any of it." Harry said, voice cold.

"Yeah, sure. You never wanted any of it. You've got it all and you act like it's nothing special! You act like you're normal!"

"I *am* normal!" Harry hissed.

"You are not! You're The Bot Who Lived! You're better than--"

"I'm not better than *anyone*... except maybe you. And Malfoy. And Snape." Harry growled. "I don't know what your problem is, Weasley, but you just made a very big mistake..."

"If I can get rid of your bloody girlfriend, then maybe--"

"She isn't my girlfriend! And 'then maybe' what? Are you still going on about wanting to be around me all the time?! When are you going to accept the fact that I do not - and doubtfully will ever - be your friend?!" Harry yelled. "If you think hurting my best friend is the proper way to get a guy to be your mate, then you've got a really skewed view of reality..."

"This from you." Ron scoffed.

"I'm not going to warn you anymore. I don't know why you can't just be like your brothers! I like *them*! Mainly because they're funny and haven't tried attacking my friends!" Harry said.

Ron narrowed his eyes. "Yeah... you like them, but not me. I'm one of your biggest fans! Don't you understand? Most people would give their *teeth* to hang around with Harry Potter!"

"Don't you ever attack one of my friends again, Weasley..." Harry said, warningly. "I'm sure you've heard what I did to Malfoy back in Diagon Alley... I can do a lot worse now."

"You wouldn't hit me." Ron said.

Harry smiled grimly. "You think not? Would you prefer another spider? How about a dozen or two? Maybe I should ask the twins to magic you to your bed like glue and let a few dozen loose on you! I don't know what it is with you and girls, Weasley, but it's grown old. Since you can't seem to learn how to respect other people, I guess you'll need to have it beaten into you!"

Without another word, Harry fired off a spell at Ron. It was only a simple disarming spell, but the force behind it made Ron fall over onto his butt. His wand, which had flown up into the air, came crashing down on top of his head.

Ron's face went red.

"Why did you attack her?" Harry asked, his voice darkly quiet. "Why did you hurt Tonks?"

Ron didn't reply, but slowly got to his feet, aiming for Harry again. "Ever since I could read about you, I've wanted to know you. But now that I do..."

"Don't you dare say you know me. You don't know anything about me! If you had acted normal, we might have been able to *be* friends. But badmouthing Hermione and physically attacking Tonks? There's no way I'll ever forgive you for that. You might as well go and sit next to Malfoy and all of the other Slytherins! You're no better than they are!" Harry growled, charging at Ron. Wands and magic be damned - Harry wanted to hit Ron like Ron had hit Tonks. Harry wanted the redhead to feel what he had made Tonks feel.

Thankfully, the brawl had only begun when the Solieyu came flying back in, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick in his wake. For the next minute or so, the three tried prying Harry and Ron apart.

When they had, Harry was sporting a few bruises and an aching jaw. Whatever else might be said for the boy, Ron Weasley had a mean left hook.

Ron was looking much better, as Harry had never really learned how to fight - magically or physically. But he had given it his best shot, certainly, and managed to get Ron's right eye rather puffy and black.

"What is going on?" McGonagall demanded as soon as Solieyu had led Harry to the far corner of the room.

"He attacked Tonks." Solieyu said, his voice calm once more. If it hadn't been for the fire in his eyes, Harry didn't think he would even have known the boy was mad. "Physically. I helped her to the hospital wing before I found you two."

Professor Flitwick squeaked. "Is she alright?"

"Define 'alright.'" Harry growled, glaring daggers at Ron, who was doing the same.

"I'm not sure. Once I got her there, I turned and immediately headed for the teacher's lounge." Solieyu said. "But as it seems like we'll all be paying Madam Pomfrey a visit, we can see for ourselves..."

"Indeed we can, Mr. Reinhardt." McGonagall said, looking down at Ron. "What do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron, wisely or not, chose to remain silent.

The group was led to the hospital wing by the pair of professors. As Harry entered, his eyes scanned the room. Finding Tonks, he immediately rushed over to her. She gasped when she saw his condition, blinking her wide eyes. "Harry! You didn't..."

"I did." Harry said, glaring at Ron as McGonagall led him further into the room. "I don't think I would have won an all-out fight against him. His punches hurt."

"Yeah, they do..." Tonks said, voice going quiet.

Harry and Solieyu exchanged a dark glance.

"Tonks... are you alright? What happened, exactly?" Harry asked, reaching out to once again put a hand on Tonks' uninjured arm.

"Well, I was going to go for a walk after Charms... I've had a lot on my mind since you took me to see that mirror. He blindsided me as I was comin' around a corner an' knocked me out, cold. That's where the black eye came from. I guess he pulled me into a room after that. Took my wand, too..."

"I think Flitwick grabbed it." Solieyu said.

Tonks nodded, then continued, "Anyway... once I came to, I got up pretty quickly and asked what he wanted. So he swaggered up, acting all full of himself, and grabbed my arm. *Tight*, too... his nails dug into my skin a bit. I think he twisted something, but... it looks worse than it feels, really..."

"That doesn't excuse what he did." Harry growled. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop him."

"As am I... if I had heard you yell when Harry had..." Solieyu said, looking off.

"Oi, don't you two go blaming yourselves. I *should* have been able to handle him on my own. If the fathead hadn't knocked me out, then stolen my wand, I wouldn't have bats flying out his arse!" Tonks said, flailing with her good arm.

"Language, Miss Tonks." Came a voice from the foot of the bed. Looking over, the trio saw Dumbledore smiling back at him, though he did look a bit older than usual. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've gotten in worse fights than that before." Tonks said, puffing herself up a bit.

Dumbledore nodded, then looked off in the direction of Madam Pomfrey's office. "Well, continue your conversation. I'm afraid I'm here on rather unpleasant business."

"What's going to happen to him?" Solieyu asked.

"Mr. Weasley? I believe a good, long talk with his mother will help quite a bit. Molly Weasley is... shall we say... good with words." The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes had returned. Briefly, Harry wondered how he got them to *do* that.

"He ought to be kicked out." Harry grumbled.

"Ah, the talk of a brief suspension may, indeed, come up. After the trouble he has caused concerning Hermione Granger, he had been warned by more than one of the staff to keep his temper under control. I cannot turn a blind eye to such an unmitigated attack, however. Now, if I may be excused, I believe Poppy is waiting for me..." Dumbledore said, nodding to Tonks once before turning and gliding to the other end of the room.

"Hope he gets expelled, the little weasel." Harry growled, wincing as his jaw let out a twinge of pain. "Ow."

"You alright?" Tonks asked. "You look kinda battered."

"Thanks a lot." Harry grumbled.

"You do look rather...disheveled." Solieyu said.

"Jaw hurts." Harry said, bringing a hand up to rub at it. "Felt like he slammed my face into a wall..."

"Should have stuck to magic." Tonks said. "You probably know more spells than him, anyway."

"Probably." Harry agreed.

Tonks reached over with her good arm and lightly ran her fingers over the bruise that was starting to form on Harry's chin. Harry winced slightly at the touch, but didn't pull back. Tonks' hand was cold and it felt good against his aching skin.

"Thanks, you two." She said after a moment.

"We wouldn't be very good friends if we had just left you." Harry said. "And how are you *doing* that?"

Tonks blinked. "Doing what?"

"Not hurting my chin! Every time I tried feeling around, it hurt like the devil..."

"Magic?" Tonks offered.

Harry and Solieyu groaned.

"Hey, Leon?" Harry said a few minutes later. "Could you run ahead and let Professor Sprout know that we probably won't be there today?"

"Sure. Should I ask her for the day's homework?"

"If you *have* to." Tonks said, making a face.

Solieyu chuckled. "Alright. You two concentrate on healing. I'll go deal with the killer plants."

With that, the long-haired boy turned and rushed from the room. The next class began in under five minutes, which would give him just enough time to make it, fully prepared.

Watching him leave, Harry made sure Solieyu was out of the room before he murmured, "Did you see the way he took on Ron?"

"Yeah... he looked *mad*."

"You should have seen how I looked." Harry said. "I hope this doesn't become a habit..."

"What?"

"People saying or doing things to you that cause me to jump in to fight." Harry said, rubbing his chin again. "Oww... First Malfoy, now Weasley. If he doesn't get kicked out of the school, I'm officially going to ask the twins to pull off some of the more disgusting pranks on the list... it's no more than he deserves."

"My hero." Tonks said, rolling her eyes. Grinning, she leaned back and yawned. "At least we get to miss Herbology today. It wasn't a total loss."

"Yeah...but still." Harry said, looking off. "Tonks... what's been bothering you? I mean, I can understand if you don't want to tell me, I just want to know everything's alright. I've... well, I've been worried, I suppose."

"It's okay, Harry." Tonks said. "I just... saw some things in the Mirror that I wasn't expecting, that's all. Didn't you need some time alone to gather yourself after you saw all of those relatives of yours?"

"I guess so... Sorry."

"For what?"

"I dunno. Being so worried?"

"If you don't know what you're apologizing for, don't apologize, you silly sod." Tonks said, smiling. "Here, want me to scoot over? You look in worse shape than I am."

"Hey, he flipped me over and I wasn't expecting it. Castles floors tend to be *hard*, see..." Harry began, earning a light swat on the arm.

Eventually, Tonks convinced Harry to sit next to her. Harry groaned as he laid out straight for a moment, his back screaming out in pain. "I hate that..." He muttered.

Half an hour later, muffled screaming could be heard from Madam Pomfrey's office. The voice was unfamiliar and female, so Harry could only assume it was the voice of the Weasley childrens' mother.

"I think I like her." Tonks said. "She's been goin' on for awhile without lowering her voice. That's impressive."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Hey, Tonks?"

"Hm?"

"I didn't just see my parents in the Mirror..."

"Oh? What else didja see?"

Harry leaned back and shut his eyes. "I saw the two of us. Older. Not very much - a couple years ahead of where we are now, I guess. You looked really different. I...still looked kinda like I do now. We were leaning against each other or something. We looked pretty happy... I wonder if that's a good sign of things to come. For that matter, I wonder if that's a sign that we'll survive Snape for a few more years."

Tonks giggled. "Ah, we can handle him. Maybe we should see if the twins could de-grease his hair for a day or two. I've always wondered why he doesn't just magic it clean..."

"Maybe he likes being a greasy git. I'd rather not think about Snape too much - it hurts my brain." Harry murmured.

"Falling asleep?" Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head. But it wasn't very much. Though he tried keeping up with the conversation, he eventually just ended up nodding or shaking his head, no matter what was being said to him. Just before drifting off, Harry vaguely remembered seeing Ron,

McGonagall, Flitwick, Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, and another woman walking back over. But he couldn't focus on anyone and any questions that may have been directed at them went unanswered.

It had been a very hectic and odd week. He had gotten very little sleep. His body was simply too tired to stay awake any longer. As he drifted off, he couldn't help but recall the image of an older version of himself, one arm around an older version of Tonks' waist.

And in the back of his mind, right as he lost consciousness, something clicked into place. It was something that had been hiding from him for quite awhile now. Something that he had been missing all along. Though he wouldn't realize it until later, it was the answer he had spent days in the library searching for. As his body gave in, Harry realized where he had seen Nicolas Flamel's name before.

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Author's Notes: Yeah, I'll probably hate the conflict scene once I get a few books down the line. But I wanted some final fight between Harry and Ron. As my AU Ron is a real slimeball, I wanted him to do something to get people to hate him. Simply badmouthing Hermione seemed a bit light in comparison to a black eye and twisted arm. As for Ron's fate and whether or not Harry will meet Mrs. Weasley in the next chapter is anyone's guess. I have a few ideas, but I tend to fly by the seat of my pants, so who knows.

And the conflict also gave me a chance to introduce another side of Leon that we haven't seen before. He's no slouch at fighting, even if he doesn't like it. Just like Harry, he has a soft spot for defending his friends. Unlike Harry, however, he's a bit BETTER at doing so.

Yeah, Harry didn't fare so well, did he? I've said from the start that I don't want an omnipotent Boy Who Lived in my fic. Even in the later years, I'll keep away from it. So a mild fist-fight between two young boys seemed just about right.

So, in summary - Ron's an ass, the Mirror is moved, Harry knows who Flame is, and we're rounding into the final stretch. Book 1 has five or six chapters, at best, remaining, I figure.

So what happens next? You'll just have to come back and check it out for yourselves, won't you?

Chapter 21 – The Philosopher's Stone

"...--re he's going to be alright?"

"Madam Pomfrey looked him over. Probably just tired."

"It has been a long week."

"Oh, I'm so sorry for how he's been acting. I don't know *WHAT'S* gotten into him..."

Harry groaned quietly, raising a hand to his head, which felt like it was pounding. "Yeah, that'll last for awhile." He said, groggily.

A sudden surge of people exclaiming his name filled the immediate area, making his groan again. "Can we please keep from being loud? My head feels like the Hogwarts Express charged over it..."

"I'll go get Madam Pomfrey." Tonks said.

"Feeling better?" Solieyu asked, quietly, from somewhere beside him.

"If Madam Pomfrey has something to make this throbbing go away." Harry replied, forcing himself into a sitting position and opening his eyes. In addition to Solieyu and Tonks, who was talking to the mediwitch in question, three other people were sitting bedside with Harry. He wasn't acquainted with two of them.

Blinking to get the sleepiness out of his system, Harry had little time to work out who they were before Madam Pomfrey was upon him.

"Well now, it seems you got smacked around a bit more than expected, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey said, running her wand slowly up his body. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful headache... kinda tired." Harry said, shrugging.

"To be expected, I suppose. Here, drink this." Madam Pomfrey said, pulling out a small vial filled with a thick, pink liquid that smelled vaguely of a toilet.

"You've got to be kidding me." Harry said, eyeballing the liquid with a scowl.

"I never kid with my patients. Drink." Said the mediwitch, giving Harry something akin to the Evil Eye. "After that, I believe Molly Weasley wishes to have a word with you."

Harry choked halfway through the potion, which tasted a lot worse than it smelled. Quickly managing down the second half, he turned back to the two people he wasn't familiar with, his eyebrows raising slightly.

"I suppose I should have known." Harry said, blinking and wiping at the corner of his mouth. "No one in this school has hair that red except the Weasleys. Um..."

"Mrs. Weasley's been here for awhile." Tonks said. "McGonagall called her over. You missed a right good show, you know."

"Show? ...Wait, how long was I out for?" Harry asked.

"Oh, don't worry. Just a bit over an hour. Decided that a nap probably couldn't hurt." Tonks said, grinning. "As for the show, Ron got an earful 'round about the Entrance Hall."

Harry blinked, then smiled crookedly. "Nice to meet you, ma'am." He said, nodding to Mrs. Weasley. "Professor Dumbledore has... ah... spoken highly of you."

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes, but was smiling, as well. "I'm sure he does, dear. Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

Harry nodded, realizing that his headache had all but vanished. "I guess Madam Pomfrey knows what she's doing after all..."

Mrs. Weasley, who Harry couldn't imagine wrangling two people as wild as Fred and George, was rather short and round and, like her children, had flamingly red hair. For that matter, the other person nearby did, too. Mrs. Weasley turned her head slightly. "Ginny? Why are you hiding behind that curtain?"

A girl who didn't look much younger than Harry or his friends was half-hidden behind a curtain used to keep patients' privacy. She squeaked when she realized that all of the people in the room were looking her way now, ducking back behind the curtain.

Harry blinked.

"Oh, you'll have to excuse her." Mrs. Weasley said, shaking her head. "Ever since Fred and George wrote home, she's wanted to meet you."

"Wrote home? What have they been saying about me?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Oh, don't worry. Nothing bad." Mrs. Weasley said, grinning. "Just that they met you, that you were very nice, if a little skinnier than they were expecting, and that you had a good sense of humor."

Letting out a sigh, Harry nodded. "Um... Sorry about all of this, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley blinked. "All of what?"

"Them having to call you out here." Harry said, wincing slightly. "I probably could have handled the situation better. I *am* in Ravenclaw, after all... fat lot o' good it did me today..."

Mrs. Weasley tutted, shaking her head as she gave Harry a pointed look. "I'm the one who should be apologizing to *you*, dear. Ronald has been acting very stubborn and immature this year. This wasn't the first time the two of you have come to blows, was it?"

"Well... technically, it was." Harry said, frowning as he thought back. "I did kind of conjure a spider into his hair when he was making Hermione feel bad..."

"He really did try to get Ron to stop before he did that, though." Came Hermione's voice. Harry jumped slightly when he heard her speak up, as he had entirely forgot that she had been there. She was standing next to Tonks, who was off to one side of the foot of the bed.

"Just the same, his attitude has been utterly abysmal." Mrs. Weasley said, letting out a short sigh. "He'll learn how to behave, though."

"What happened with him, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Suspended for a week and a half." Solieyu offered. "We were all nearby when the punishment was dished out."

Harry nodded, rubbing at the side of his neck. "Oi, these beds aren't very comfortable... Wonder if I'm free to go..."

"Oh, I suspect so, dear, if all you've got is the headache... and you said yourself that it went away." Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry nodded. "Well... let's get out of here, shall we? I'd rather not have to have dinner up here, if it's all the same to everyone else."

"Thought you'd never bring it up." Tonks said, patting her stomach.

Moments later, the assembled group was heading down for the Entrance Hall, going over what had happened since Harry fell asleep in greater detail. Tonks had been healed up by Madam Pomfrey, as had Harry, and the two of them had gone with Professor McGonagall to meet Mrs. Weasley and say for themselves what had happened. Afterwards, they had all returned to the hospital wing to wait for Harry to wake up. It hadn't been ten minutes after that when Harry finally came to.

It was nearly time for supper, and most of the school's students were heading for the Great Hall. Mrs. Weasley said that Ron had been told to wait there for her. Harry wasn't sure whether he was inwardly going to enjoy the moment they arrived or not. While he hated to bother a woman who seemed as nice as Mrs. Weasley, he wasn't going to be sad to see Ron gone, even if it was just for a short time.

Hermione and Tonks talked quietly, bringing up the rear as they walked, Tonks relating events of the day back to the Gryffindor girl. Solieyu, who walked next to Harry, kept casting strange looks at Ginny Weasley, who was keeping beside her mother and looking back at Harry when she thought he wasn't looking.

When they did finally arrive, it was to find a sea of students, happily inhaling their third meal of the day. All except for Ron, who was sitting by himself at the close end of the Gryffindor table. Most of the excited chatter died down a little when they saw an unfamiliar pair of people enter. It didn't last long, since Fred and George loudly greeted her from halfway up the table. Talk returned to normal after that.

"Now then, I believe you have something to say, *don't* you?" Mrs. Weasley said as she stalked over to Ron and nearly hoisted him up. Harry's group followed at a distance, Harry himself raising an eyebrow at Mrs. Weasley's sudden change of tone. Suddenly, he got the feeling that Ron was getting *exactly* what he deserved.

Mrs. Weasley marched Ron over so that he was standing just a few feet away from Harry. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Solieyu's hand tense up. If Ron had the brass to go for his wand in front of most of the student body, the staff, *and* his mother...

"I'm sorry." Ron mumbled, looking anywhere but at Harry's group.

Mrs. Weasley raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for *what*, Ronald?"

"Sorry for being such a jerk." Ron said, still mumbling.

Harry shrugged. "Apology accepted, I suppose. As long as something like that *never* happens again."

"Oh, don't you worry, Harry, dear." Mrs. Weasley said, her voice back to the kind, sweet one that Harry was more used to. "I'll teach him manners if I have to spend twenty hours a day doing it."

Ron winced.

"It was nice meeting you, dear." Mrs. Weasley said, rounding Ron about and pointing him for the doors. "You'll have to stop by over the summer sometime for a visit. We really should be going now, though. You're going to miss supper if we keep chatting away the hours like this. Ron, Ginny, come on!"

Harry's group bid their goodbyes to Mrs. Weasley. Hermione, Tonks, and Harry said goodbye to Ginny, as well, which caused the girl to

lower her head and blush. Harry raised an eyebrow at this. He tried to ask one of the girls what *that* was all about, but received little more than giggling as a reply.

Someone at the Gryffindor table then called over to Hermione. Looking around, they saw it was Neville Longbottom, gesturing for her to come over and sit down. Seeing the confused looks on the Ravenclaws' faces, Hermione explained, "They've been loads better to me lately. Most of the other Gryffindors are..."

"That's great!" Harry said, smiling. "I was hoping they weren't all a bunch of thick-headed prats."

Neville called out again. Hermione grinned a little. "Um... well, I should be going. Fred and George might come to get me over if I don't."

The group split then, Hermione going over and sitting near Neville and Dean Thomas. Across from them, the Weasley twins seemed to be making a remark about the look on Ron's face as he was wheeled out of the Great Hall.

"Eventful day." Solieyu commented as they sat down at the end of the Ravenclaw table.

Tonks began stockpiling food on her plate, her injuries earlier in the day seeming to do nothing to alter her usual appetite.

"How do you eat so much without gaining weight?" Harry asked, pondering a baked potato.

"Magic." Tonks said.

"Urg... Tonks, that's getting old." Harry groaned, shaking his head.

"Are we going to head back to the library after we eat?" Solieyu asked.

Harry's head snapped up.

Both Tonks and Solieyu blinked at him. The former waved a hand in front of his face and asked, "Harry? You okay?"

"No... I mean, yes. I mean... right before I passed out in the hospital wing, it came to me!" Harry said in a hushed exclamation.

"What did?" Solieyu asked.

"Who Flamel is! I realized where I had seen his name before!" Harry said.

"Where?" Tonks asked.

"Dumbledore's chocolate frog card! Something about his work on alchemy with his friend, Nicolas Flamel! I'm sure of it!" Harry said.

"Well, at least we know what direction to go in now." Solieyu said, rubbing his chin in thought. "I don't think we ever checked any speciality books. Just ones on famous wizards. He must not be very mainstream if he wasn't listed in what we've checked, though."

"Alright, so Nicolas Flamel is involved in alchemy. Something of his is being kept guarded by that three-headed dog. Whatever it is must be important enough for Snape to want... and badly, at that. Either of you know anything about alchemy?" Harry asked, his meal all but forgotten.

"It's a small field." Solieyu said. "There aren't many things that would even be worth *getting* a giant dog to guard... whatever it was could simply be retransmuted."

"Re-what?" Tonks asked.

"Transmutation is the process of changing one item to another via alchemy. Lead to gold, as an example, though that's banned by the Ministry and Gringott's both. It wouldn't do very well for someone to make their own supply of gold. Alchemists are required to register with the Ministry, as well." Solieyu explained.

"You know a lot about this." Harry said, eyebrows raised.

Solieyu shrugged. "You aren't the only one who reads in his spare time, Harry. We just have different tastes."

"No kidding. So... what, whatever's hidden is something that can't be re...transmuted, was it?" Harry asked.

"Most likely. I don't see why else they would hide it. Unfortunately, I'm not very knowledgable *about* these things, though. It's been a good, long while since I read anything on the subject, and important things tend to be either written about in detail or severely glossed over."

"Damn." Harry grumbled, shaking his head. Just then, a thought came to him. "We should ask Hermione."

"Huh?" Tonks asked.

"Well, she's the only one I know of who spends more time getting books out of that place than I do. *We* might not have found anything, but maybe *she* has!" Harry said.

Dinner didn't come to an end quick enough for the trio, who kept going over what could be hidden. Tonks caught up to Hermione as she saw the Gryffindor heading out of the Great Hall. Harry and Solieyu quickly followed.

"Hermione! Hey, wait up!" Tonks called.

Hermione, halfway up the first set of stairs, blinked. "Tonks? Harry, Leon, what is it?"

"Have you ever heard of the name Nicolas Flamel before?" Harry asked, voice tight.

"Nicolas Flamel?"

"Yeah, we... well..." Harry started, faltering quickly. "Oh, bloody hell... Look, let's find an empty classroom. This is going to take a bit to explain."

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As it turned out, after quite a long explanation, Hermione *had* heard of Flamel before. She led them to the library at a quick pace and rushed deep into the rows of books. She came back with a positively gigantic, old book that must have been half as tall as Hermione was.

"What is that?" Harry found himself asking.

"Something I checked out earlier in the year. Something to read before I went to sleep at night." Hermione explained quickly.

Setting the book down on a nearby table, she flipped it open and started turning pages as fast as she dared. Her eyes lit up when she came to the spot she had been searching for. "Here! This should be it!" She said. The three Ravenclaws leaned in close to read what was on the page.

"Nicolas Flamel," Harry began, partly under his breath, "Is the only known creator of the Philosopher's Stone." He paused, then asked, "Philosopher's Stone?"

Hermione flipped the page and pointed at a paragraph, causing Harry to lean back over and continue, "Lesse... 'concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, which is said to contain the amazing power of turning lead into gold.'"

Solieyu shrugged when Harry looked up at him.

"...'It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.' ...Hold on, *immortal*?!" Harry exclaimed.

"**SHHH!**" Came Madam Pince's voice from elsewhere in the library.

"An immortal Snape. Now there's a scary thought." Tonks said, scowling.

"Well, according to this, Flamel's the only known person to have one of the things. It also says he's six hundred and sixty-five years old as of last year. No wonder we couldn't find him in any recent texts. He's a fossil!" Harry said, shaking his head.

"Well," Solieyu said slowly. "Now we know. Dumbledore is friends with Flamel, who must have asked the headmaster to keep the Stone safe for whatever reasons. And that dog is guarding it."

"We have to tell someone." Hermione said, quickly.

"I think she's right." Said Harry. "This is way out of our league."

"Are you kidding? We'd get in trouble for even knowing that dog's *there!*" Tonks said. "I dunno about you, but I don't wanna get expelled already."

"Well, we have to do something, obviously." Solieyu said. "If we don't, Snape's free to go after the Stone at any point he wishes to."

"Great." Harry said, sighing. "So *now* what do we do?"

None of the other three had an answer to his question.

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Harry sighed, leaning his head against the back of his chair. Rubbing at his temples slowly, he pondered telling one of the professors about what he and his friends knew. Telling Dumbledore directly didn't seem like that smart a choice, all things considered.

It was late - around ten at night, or around thereof, anyway. Harry was one of the few people still awake and in the common room. Tonks and Solieyu had turned in half an hour earlier, leaving Harry with his troubled thoughts.

'I wish,' Harry thought as he let his eyes slip shut momentarily, *'...that I knew what Snape hated me for. It would make working the final piece of this stupid puzzle out much easier...'*

With another sigh, Harry stood. Whatever the reason, Harry and his friend were simply no match for a fully-grown wizard... to say nothing of one that was an expert at potions. For all Harry knew, the man could concoct some sort of acid to fling at him, should he try to interfere.

Harry walked through the arched pathway and asked Walter if he could be let out. After claiming it was sort of an emergency, the old man in the portrait allowed him to leave. Harry walked as quickly as he could without breaking into a full-blown run. Snape was trying to get something that would make him immortal. After that, he could kill Harry at will, or whatever the Potions Master wanted done with him, and nothing could be done in turn. After all, to Harry's knowledge, there wasn't a way to kill an immortal man.

Walking the passageways, he found himself standing in front of Professor Flitwick's office, behind which were his personal quarters. At the start of the school year, the little wizard had told the new students to come to him if anything was the matter. Biting at his lower lip tentatively, Harry raised a hand and knocked three times.

"Just a moment!" Came a squeaky voice from inside. A moment later, the door opened, and Professor Flitwick stood before him, looking up. "Ah, Mr. Potter! Out a bit late, aren't you?"

Harry hesitated for a brief moment, then sighed and nodded. "May I come in, Professor? There's something I need to say...and I couldn't think of anyone else to go to..."

Flitwick tilted his head, obviously curious, and stepped to one side, allowing Harry entry. The two walked over to a desk that was low to the ground, Flitwick hopping into an equally-small chair behind it. "I hope nothing is seriously wrong..." He said, watching as Harry sat in a normal-sized chair on the opposite side of the desk.

"I wish I could say there wasn't, but... can I be perfectly honest with you, Professor? It'd be so much easier to get this out in one burst..." Harry said, looking down at the floor.

"Of course, of course..." Flitwick said, now frowning.

Harry took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and began explaining everything to his head of house. How he had gotten chased into the room on the third floor and seen the dog, how he had overheard the staff talking about Flamel, and how he had seen Snape apparently coming from the room in question. He then went on to say that he and his friends had worked out *who* Flamel was and came to the

conclusion that Dumbledore must have been guarding the Philosopher's Stone...and that Snape was after it.

Flitwick listened intently, nodding slowly at certain times and looking shocked at others. When Harry was done, Flitwick tilted his head back and said, "Well, Harry, I must say, I'm surprised. For a first year to work out all of that is quite amazing, to be sure. but Severus wanting the Philosopher's Stone? Are you quite sure that you saw correctly?"

Harry didn't fail to notice Flitwick's casual use of his first name. Feeling a little more at ease at having not been promptly cast out of the man's office on the grounds of making things up, Harry continued, "I'm certain of it, Professor. His robes were ripped up pretty badly... and Terry Boot's looked just like that when he and one of the other guys accidentally wandered into the dog's room awhile back..."

"I'll be speaking to Mr. Boot and Mr. Haskit about that, by the way. From what you've said, Mr. Boot will tell anyone who listens. Oh dear, oh dear... I was worried that Albus might have been making a mistake, letting the Stone come here... I would have at least thought that the room itself had been more properly warded, for that matter. I can't help but wonder why it wasn't... Had I known, I would have overseen the process personally..." Flitwick said, shaking his head.

"That does seem strange, now that you mention it..." Harry said, frowning deeply. "...Maybe Snape had been there previously, to see what had been placed as a guardian?"

"*Professor* Snape, Harry." Flitwick squeaked. "And I don't believe so. Why would Severus help set up the tasks guarding the Stone if he wished to take it for his own?"

"...Good question." Harry said, starting to feel frustrated. "I know that something's going on, though... What other reason would Sn-Professor Snape, sorry... What other reason would he possibly have for *being* there, though? I doubt he goes to check for bodies or anything..."

Flitwick sat in thought for a moment before saying, "Perhaps we should go and tell Albus. I think it would be for the best, Harry. If

Severus *is* doing anything against the headmaster's wishes, then it would be best for the headmaster to see to it for himself..."

"Well, let's go tell him, then!" Harry said, sitting on the front of his chair in preparation to leave. "The sooner, the better..."

"I'm afraid we can't right now." Flitwick said, grimacing slightly. "We was called away on business and left right after tonight's meal. He should be back in a day or two, though."

"That might be too late..." Harry said, suddenly feeling like a balloon that had lost all its air. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Harry, you shouldn't be so jumpy..." Flitwick said, leaning forward in his own chair. "Albus trusts Severus, and I see no reason why he would try anything to betray that trust."

"But it would be the perfect time!" Harry groaned, leaning back. "With the headmaster away, who knows what Professor Snape might try? For all we know, it's a hoax meant to get the headmaster out of Hogwarts..."

Flitwick frowned, the gears in his brain wheeling about as rapidly as they ever did. "I'll send him an owl immediately, Harry. If he needs to be, Albus knows ways of quickly returning to the school. And anyway, I seriously doubt that Severus will get by Fluffy before Albus gets back... he said it wouldn't take long."

"*FLUFFY?!*" Harry exclaimed, nearly falling out of the chair he was in. "That three-headed dog is called **FLUFFY?**"

"Rubeus named him." Shrugged Flitwick. "It was cuter when it was a pup."

Shaking his head, Harry sighed and got to his feet. "Well... I guess I'll go back to the Tower, then. You're right, Professor, I guess I'm just being paranoid about the whole situation..."

Flitwick stood as well, walking around his desk and going with Harry back to the door. "Do you think the staff should keep an eye on Severus, just in case?"

Flattered that Flitwick would ask for his input on the matter, Harry paused before shaking his head. "No, I think he'd notice if you did. But thanks, anyway... It's been driving me crazy not knowing who I could talk to about all of this..."

Flitwick smiled. "Think nothing of it, Harry." He said, his usual, chipper mood falling back into place. "Thank you for trusting me enough to come and tell me."

Harry nodded and the two bid each other goodnight.

"Why on earth did he want an office on the seventh floor?" Harry wondered aloud during his trip down the main stairs. "I would have demanded a first floor office, if I were his size. Must be great exercise, though..."

It was almost eleven now, and Harry had cast the normal silencing charms on his shoes. Without his cloak, he was going to have to be much more careful on his return trip to the Tower. Talking things over with Flitwick *had* made him feel a little better about the situation, but something inside of him was still nagging at him. Something didn't feel right.

Harry paused halfway down a flight of stairs, taking in the eerie silence of Hogwarts at night. While Flitwick had helped try to put him at ease about Snape wanting the Stone, Harry wanted to be sure that the potions professor hadn't tried anything thus far. If he didn't go and at least peek into the room on the third floor, his mind would never let him have a peaceful moment until Dumbledore's return.

Shaking his head and berating himself for his own paranoia, Harry made his way back to the corridor he and Tonks had tried escaping down on the night they had tried following Solieyu to the hospital wing. Things remained eerily quiet... It was nice most of the time and was, in fact, one of the reasons that Harry enjoyed taking late night strolls under his cloak. While it was enjoyable being around so many people who didn't want to beat him to a pulp, he still enjoyed a bit of quiet once in awhile. Silence at a magical boarding school, Harry had realized early on, was rather hard to come by.

As Harry saw the door to the room come into sight, he couldn't help but wonder again about the name that Hagrid had chosen for it. It hadn't seemed very 'Fluffy-like' when it was trying to gobble up he and Tonks.

His thoughts were shattered as he drew closer, however. The air seemed to be magically charged - something Harry had gotten used to while being taught certain spells in his classes. The fact that the door to Fluffy's room was slightly ajar only made matters worse. He ran forward and grabbed at the handle, but was stopped when something filled the silence.

It was low and quiet - Harry had to strain to hear it properly. When he realized what it was, however, his eyes went wide and he slung the door open. Rushing in, he quickly recoiled at the sight before him. Fluffy lay on the ground on its side at the back of the room, blood splattered all over it. Good amounts of the red liquid were also on the walls and floor nearby. Two of the creature's three heads didn't appear to have any life left in them, and the third looked close to joining them. The sound he had heard was the giant dog whimpering, weakly, in pain as it slowly died.

Even worse than the sight of the mangled beast's form, forever, was the sight of the trapdoor it had been sitting on.

It was wide open.

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Author's Notes: We may finish up quicker than I thought, depending on how long the following chapters wind up being. I'm very anxious to get my version of events in the final room taken care of. I guarantee that no one will be able to work out what I'm going to do, either.

And what of Harry? Will he rush back to the Tower to get his friends, or will he take the plunge and venture on alone? How will he get past the various challenges set up if he does? All will be answered in Chapter 22, which I'm hoping won't take long to churn out. When things pick up in action, I tend to pick up in writing speed. It helps that I beat Paper Mario 2 and can devote my time a little more towards finishing book 1 here.

Also, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny get brief cameos here! Yay! And Hermione did something important to the plot! I knew there was a good reason for keeping her around. And Ron got suspended!

I was planning to have Harry and Leon have a detention in the forest, as I was really wondering about the thing with the dead unicorn, Firenze, and Quirrellmort slaking his evil thirst... but simply figured that it would be too difficult to wedge into how things were moving along. I hope nobody minds.

I also hope no one minds me letting Flitwick having some seriousness to him. Sure, he's an emotional guy, but I think that when a student comes to him in need, he can be as serious as the next wizard.

Anyway, I've rambled enough. I hope you've enjoyed Chapter 21. Get ready for things to come to a rather interesting climax. I know I sure am!

Chapter 22 – Twisted Reality

"Damn..."

Harry swore under his breath, staring at the open trapdoor and trying to ignore the feeble whimpers of pain from Fluffy. This was bad - this was very, very bad. If he went for one of the professors, it might give Snape enough time to go through whatever was beneath the room and get to the Stone.

If he went alone, however, he would wind up facing down a fully grown wizard that may or may not have turned himself immortal. Harry didn't know how the Elixir of Life worked. For all he knew, one simply wished for some and it appeared. He was in trouble, no matter which option he chose.

Looking up at the dying form of Fluffy, Harry winced. If Snape could do that much damage to a monster of those proportions, what could he do to another human? Harry wasn't sure he was willing to find out. As he struggled with his thoughts, one seemed to overpower all others; if Snape got the Stone and made himself immortal... then everyone, not just Harry, would be in serious trouble. With as evil as Snape seemed to him, Harry obviously didn't believe the potions master would use the Elixir of Life for the power of good.

Reaching into his robes, Harry pulled out his wand. If Snape got the Stone, it would most likely result in something bad happening to Hogwarts and its students. It was no secret that Snape seemed to outright loathe teaching what he felt to be incompetent children, after all. And if something bad did happen to the school, Harry would be forced to return to Privet Drive. Despite knowing he could count on Tonks and Andromeda for help, he didn't want to return to that place ever again if it could be helped. He had to do something and he had to do it quick.

Taking a deep breath, Harry walked up to the edge of the trapdoor and peered down. Seeing only darkness, he bit his lip and murmured, "If he could make it, I can, too..."

With that, Harry jumped in.

Harry let out a loud 'whoomp!' when his backside hit the tunnel as it curved to one side and had to brace himself for impact as he was spat out the bottom of it. He bounced off of something soft, however, and he rolled harmlessly to the ground below.

Catching his breath, Harry looked around. The remnants of some form of plant were all over the floor, most looking extremely shredded. Harry wasn't sure what kind of plantlife it had been, nor was he aware of the spell needed to do such damage, but he didn't have much time to worry about it. The door ahead of him was open slightly.

Getting to his feet, Harry walked over and peeked in. If there were more rooms - and Harry was sure that there were - he didn't want to go barging into any for fear that it was the last one. Harry wasn't keen on running into Snape in a sunny hallway, much less in a dank set of rooms where no one would be able to save him.

Thankfully, this door only opened to an empty, if a rather wet, passageway. Harry entered the corridor, walking along the slanted floor, idly wondering where the water that was dripping from the walls came from. He couldn't be *that* far underground, could he? The drop hadn't seemed to be long enough to put him under the lake, anyway.

The passage was relatively short and the door at the far end was once again cracked slightly. Harry peeked into this new room as he had done with the watery passage. Aside from a strange buzzing noise, the room was quite empty. Stepping into it properly, Harry realized he was completely wrong. It was far from empty, in fact.

The room was quite tall, once again leaving Harry to wonder just what part of the castle he was in. He could barely see the top of it, not just because it was rather dark, but because of the hundreds of little, flying creatures in it. They positively filled the upper areas of the room and filled it with a steady buzzing sound from their rapidly-flapping wings.

The noise was highly annoying and Harry found himself having to concentrate on the task at hand. Before looking for the other door in the room, Harry decided to cast his usual number of silencing charms over himself. Best to take seemingly needless precautions when you

weren't sure what you would be up against. He suddenly began wishing that he had brought his invisibility cloak along for the journey.

When Harry located the other door in the room, he raised an eyebrow. A number of the flying creatures seemed to be on the ground, motionless, near it. Door itself was comprised of two halves, both of which seemed to have been nearly blown clean off their hinges. Whoever had been there before him obviously didn't have the patience to figure out how to properly get through it.

Walking closer, Harry knelt on the ground beside one of the creatures, surprised to find out that it was really a key with wings. Looking up, he saw a number of brooms that also looked as if they had seen better days. Putting two and two together, Harry looked back up to the swarm of enchanted keys flying around above him.

"Okay, that's odd..." Harry murmured to himself. "Fluffy was all but dead... that plant was a goner... and now I'm in a room filled with flying keys. So... that would be, what? Professor Flitwick mentioned that Hagrid named the dog, and it only made sense that someone as big as Hagrid could find something with three heads cute enough to give it a name like 'Fluffy'...

Standing against, Harry walked over to the splintered door, trying to judge what spell had been used as his thoughts continued racing. If Hagrid provided the guard dog... then Professor Sprout probably offered the plant... And Flitwick must have enchanted the keys. That meant that a number of different tests could lie in wait ahead of him. Hogwarts had a fair amount of teachers, so it only made sense that they offer support to guard the Stone.

Briefly, Harry wondered if Snape had also contributed. But... if it had been Snape, then why all the trouble of killing the dog, blowing up the plant, and shattering the door? Surely, he would have known how to get around the objects if necessary, wouldn't he? Harry frowned as he carefully made his way through the broken doorway, feeling increasingly anxious at what could still be between himself and his Potions professor.

The next chamber Harry entered was too dark to properly see in. He pulled his wand and was about to utter a '*Lumos!*' to it when the room

lit up of its own accord. Having been around Tonks for as long as he had, Harry had learned many wizarding games of all sorts. Though she was an utter loss at playing it herself, Harry found the wizarding chess set she had pointed out to him to be rather interesting... but that wasn't really saying much, as he found just about everything having to do with magic interesting in some way.

Harry walked into the room further, stepping onto what had once been a beautifully-made chess board. Now, there were several chunks missing from it, laying elsewhere in the room - some on top of the mutilated chess pieces. The ground also seemed to be of different levels, as Harry had to be careful not to misstep and fall or trip over bits of the board that were raised or lowered.

"He must have been *really* mad about something..." Harry said quietly. "I don't think this was the best plan I've ever had..."

This room, in particular, was eerily quiet. Before there had been the sounds of water dripping or the keys flying to try keeping his mind off of where he really was. But here, in the dim light of a lost battle, things really began sinking in.

Harry walked to the other side of the room, clutching his wand in a painfully-tight grip, his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm. On the up side, he was smaller and faster than his Potions professor. He was also quite used to physical pain, which had to work out in his favor at *some* point in his life. The trouble was that he wasn't sure what kind of spells Snape was wielding. It was obvious that they had a severe amount of power to cause such devastation in all of the rooms he had been through so far.

Before reaching the door, a stench caught Harry offguard, causing him to pull his shirt up and over his nose. It smelled, to Harry, as if someone had let a few dozen rotting corpses loose somewhere nearby. If Fluffy's body, with all of its wounds had been in any indication, that is, as Harry had never personally encountered a corpse. And, he thought as he reached for the door's handle, he hoped he never *would*.

But even as he opened the door, he thought the stench was vaguely familiar. It was only after he had ventured further into the next room

that he realized why. Against one of the walls was a giant troll, slumped over away from Harry. While it seemed to be like the one Harry and his friends had encountered in the dungeons months before, as he drew closer, he saw it had a different color and build entirely.

He also saw that its head was no longer still connected with its body. It sat, upside down, just to the side of its body. The look in the troll's eyes was of dumb surprise, as if it had expected anything but to be prematurely sent to death's door. Feeling rather nauseated now, Harry looked away and began breathing shallowly through his mouth. The smell wasn't as strong that way, though it was almost as if he could *taste* the stench, then.

It was still better.

Running to the far door as quickly as his legs could take him, Harry flung it open and rushed inside. Whatever was in the new room couldn't be as awful as what he had just left behind, after all. Indeed, all Harry saw was what appeared to be a table in the center of the room.

On it were a set of bottles in various sizes, filled with liquids of different colors.

Harry walked towards the table, reasoning that the chess board might have belonged to Professor Sinistra or McGonagall, as they seemed to be two of the smartest teachers at the school. The troll, however, Harry couldn't work out. Why a troll would be in that room, along with how the thing would eat to stay alive, couldn't puzzle Harry for long - At that moment, fire had burst from the floor in front of both doors to the room. The one back to the troll's room was purple, and the one ahead was black.

"Just what I needed." Harry grumbled as he stepped up to the table. Curiously enough, neither the table nor the bottles on it seemed to be disturbed in the least. Seemed like Potions work to Harry, which only further made him think that Snape was really the culprit. After all, wouldn't Snape simply be able to brew himself up more potion to get by the flames?

A roll of parchment was next to the bottles. With an annoyed sigh, Harry walked over, picked up the paper, and began to read.

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Elsewhere in the castle, one young girl tossed and turned in her sleep, unable to find a peaceful night's rest. Opening her eyes, which were a pale blue at the moment, one Nymphadora Tonks sat up in bed and rubbed at her eyes. Whether she had eaten something bad for supper that night or whether something was wrong, she didn't rightly know. But something was definitely keeping her from getting her beauty sleep.

Yanking away her blankets, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and slipped out. Squeaking quietly as the cold, stone floor hit her bare feet, she rushed to get dressed. She might not have the kind of invisibility that Harry had when *he* went out for midnight strolls through the castle, but she had learned the spells he used to keep himself silent when he moved around. Maybe a good, long walk would help tire her out so that she could sleep away the rest of the night.

Tossing her pajamas back onto her bed, Tonks charmed herself just like Harry usually did and proceeded out of the first year girls' dorm. Grumbling under her breath about insomnia, she made her way up to the common room. Aside from several fifth and seventh years who had fallen asleep while studying the night before, no one was awake.

Tonks slipped down the arched passageway leading out of Ravenclaw Tower, lightly tapping on Walter's portrait as she came to it. The old wizard in the painting snorted as he was awakened yet again. "Huh? What? ... Oh... Someone else wanting to get out at this hour? You should be in bed!" Said Walter, groggily.

"It's me!" Tonks whispered. "...And whatta ya mean 'again'? Who else managed to escape?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, yes... here, let me speak to you properly." Walter said, swinging open.

Tonks walked out, letting him close behind her. "There. Now then, who else came out?"

"Harry did, about an hour or so ago. Something about an emergency."

"He hasn't come back?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Tonks frowned. Harry wouldn't go off and claim it was an emergency unless something was really bothering him. Turning, Tonks took off in a run, deciding to head for the hospital wing to see if he had admitted himself for some reason or another. As she ran, she felt something feel as if it were pulling at her insides. Something felt very, very wrong.

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Harry scowled. He might have been a Ravenclaw and had the ability to work things out quickly, but it didn't change the fact that he absolutely *hated* word puzzles. From what he had worked out so far, there were two potions among the seven were used to get through the fire that burned before either of the room's two exits. One to go back the way he had come from, one to go forward to whatever was in the *next* room.

Two of the potions held wine and three seemed to kill you upon ingestion. Running a hand back through his hair in annoyance, Harry reread what was on the paper. "'Second, different are those who stand at either end, but if you would move onward, neither is your friend...' So...I can cross off both potions on either end as to being the ones that get me through..."

Licking his lips, Harry decided to use his wand to help mark what was in what bottle. "Okay, let's see... neither of the end bottles are useful for getting me ahead. The one on the far right can't be poison, though, since 'you will always find some on nettle wine's left side' and since no bottles are to the right of it, it's safe. So *that* bottle must get me back through the purple fire."

Harry gazed at the five remaining bottles, glancing briefly back at the paper. "...Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides' huh? Well, the one to the left of the rightmost bottle can't be poison, since it isn't to the left of any wine. If the bottle next to the leftmost bottle is poison, then the second to the left *is* wine. And *that* would make the 'giant' bottle wine, as well, since 'the second left and second on the right are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight'..."

Harry smiled and reached out, grabbing the third bottle from the left - the 'dwarf,' as the paper called it. "The first bottle is poison, to the left of some wine. The third is the one that gets me through the black fire. The fourth *and* fifth bottles are poison, and the giant bottle is filled with wine. The final gets me back through the purple flames! Take that, you greasy git!"

Feeling confident, Harry gulped down the contents of the third, tiny bottle. Certainly not *feeling* poisoned, Harry smirked and set the bottle back down, rushing forward and, closing his eyes, leapt through the black flames.

Quickly realizing that he wasn't harmed in any way, Harry grabbed the door handle and flung the door open. He gaped at what he saw before him.

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"He isn't here, he isn't here!" Tonks whined to herself, bouncing on the spot as she took in the hospital wing's currently-empty beds. No one was presently injured and in need of Madam Pomfrey's care.

The knot in her stomach grew as she quickly scurried back out of the hospital wing before she alerted the mediwitch from her office. Tonks stood just outside the door and nibbled at her lower lip. The most obvious place to go was to the headmaster's office. But as it was very late and as she didn't know the password to gain entry, going there wasn't much good.

With no other option, Tonks took off in another dead sprint, hoping that Professor Flitwick was still awake. As she ran, a single thought kept repeating, over and over, in her mind: '*Please be alright, please be alright...*'

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Professor Snape stood, wand in hand, looking fit to kill. However, he wasn't aiming at Harry - far from it. For across the room, wand also drawn, was Professor Quirrell, who was aiming back at Snape.

Both turned to look at Harry as he burst into the room.

"Potter?!" The two professors quickly spat out at the same time, heads snapping back to glare at one another shortly thereafter.

"Disarm him, Potter! I have him covered!" Growled Snape, eyes narrowed.

"H-He's trying to t-take the Stone!" Quirrell stuttered. "D-Disarm *HIM!*"

Harry stared at the two. He had only been expecting Snape down in the final room. Having Quirrell there was something entirely out of Harry's nonexistent plans. Nonetheless, it was nice knowing that he wasn't alone in taking on his seemingly psychotic potions professor. Harry raised his wand and aimed at Snape, who goggled at him out of the corner of his eyes.

"Potter, don't be stupid!" Snape roared. "Quirrell is the traitor! He is the one who has sought out the Stone all this time!"

"P-Potter is smarter than you g-give him c-c-credit for, Severus!" Said Quirrell in a disturbingly calm way, the corners of his mouth twitching upward. "Always w-was smarter than he h-had any business b-b-being."

"You tried cursing me off of my broom during Quidditch." Harry said, voice quiet. "...And I saw you walk by with your robes all torn up."

"I was trying to stop *HIM!*" Yelled Snape, still refusing to take his eyes - or his wand - away from Quirrell. "Surely you noticed that *HE* was strangely absent when the troll was let in during Halloween!"

Harry blinked. "That's a good point..." He said, despite the fact that Snape had said it. Harry turned to look at Quirrell, who seemed more than a little agitated.

"I was out patrolling the dungeons because I had a feeling Severus would try something funny to cause a distraction!" He said. Neither Harry nor Snape noticed the lack of stuttering.

"A feeble excuse, Quirinus." Snape snarled. "I had been at the staff table for the whole of the evening. Surely, one of my Slytherins would have caught sight of the troll before coming up that night."

Quirrell glared at Snape. "As if you actually care about the safety of *any* of the students in this place!" He said.

Harry frowned suddenly.

"Wait a second," He said, looking strangely at Quirrell. "You aren't stuttering anymore..."

Snape's eyebrows went up momentarily. His eyes narrowed even further. "Yes... you aren't. Care to explain this, Quirinus?"

"I-It comes and goes!" Quirrell said, looking nervous for the first time.

Harry looked back and forth between Snape and Quirrell, now unsure of who to trust. All of the evidence had pointed towards his Potions professor... but if he was the one behind everything, why was Quirrell acting so decidedly unlike himself? Something wasn't right. Something definitely wasn't right.

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"Professor Flitwick! Professor Flitwick! Ohh, please be awake!" Tonks cried, knocking rapidly on the door to the little wizard's office on the seventh floor. She was out of breath and felt slightly ill from the amount of running she had been doing.

The door opened seconds later, revealing Flitwick in a small set of pajamas. Looking up at his second visitor in as many hours, he asked, "Miss Tonks? Is everything alright?"

"No! At least... no, I don't think so!" Tonks said, nibbling at her lower lip. "I think something's happened to Harry... have you seen him at all tonight?"

Flitwick blinked. "I have... He came here earlier, in fact."

"Did he say anything... strange?"

Flitwick tilted his head to the side, looking up at the worry in Tonks' face. "He did, actually."

"Where did he go after he left?"

"I'm not sure. I take it he didn't return?"

"No... Walter said he didn't let anyone back in after Harry left. I... Professor, we know what's o--"

"I know, Miss Tonks, Harry told me quite a bit about what you've learned this year." Said Flitwick, smiling slightly up at Tonks. "I must say, I was impressed, to a point. He seemed to think, however, that Severus was trying to get at what was hidden."

Tonks blinked, but realized that Flitwick wouldn't go saying what it was that was hidden, talking to her as he was. "Professor, I... I think Harry might have gone to that dog's room to check to make sure everything's alright. I've had this sicky feeling in my stomach ever since I woke up..."

Now Flitwick looked worried. "Surely Mr. Potter is wiser than to go back there..."

"Not if he thought he didn't have a choice... you don't know him like I do, sir... If Snape got his hands on the-- on... what's hidden there, then who knows what he'd do. He doesn't exactly seem to like the students, you know..."

Flitwick nervously twisted at the bottom of his pajama top. "I still think that Severus being involved is silly, but... I'll contact his quarters to see if he's in. Please, come in, Miss Tonks."

Tonks nodded and stepped inside, closing the door behind her as Flitwick threw some powder into the fire and called out, "Severus Snape's office!"

The fire flared, and Flitwick called out to Snape, but there was no answer. A moment later, he tried again, getting the same response. The flames died down and the tiny wizard turned back to Tonks with a worried look on his face. "I need to get to Minerva's office. I fear that I've made a very serious mistake."

Tonks' stomach, which had been so very knotted up, promptly bottomed out.

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"**HEX HIM, POTTER!**" Snape yelled.

"H-he's not an idiot, Severus!" Quirrell yelled back, his stuttering seeming to be rather poor at this point.

Harry's mind whirled as he tried working out who to trust. Looking to Snape, he asked, "What *were* you doing to me at that Quidditch match, if you weren't the one trying to knock me off my broom?"

"I was saying the counter-curse, foolish boy!" Snape said, darkly. "Because *he* was the one trying to knock you off!"

"I d-did no such thing!" Quirrell argued. "Severus has never liked you, Potter! Surely you've realized why he wants the Stone by now!"

"I have no desire for the thing." Snape growled. "Potter! I assume you've noticed that the challenges along the way. You *do* realize who created them, haven't you?"

"...Well... Hagrid must have given Professor Dumbledore the dog, Sprout worked with the plants, Flitwick on the keys... I'm not sure who set up the chess board, though."

"Minerva." Quirrell said quickly, beating Snape to it.

"Alright... She did that, then. Then there was a troll, but I don't know who would put that there. Then there was your Potions test." Harry said, nodding to Snape.

"I'm surprised you made it through." Sniped Snape. "But that is not the point. Put two and two together, Potter!"

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"The troll! That isn't the *first* you've seen this year!" Snape yelled.

"Of course it isn't the first one I've seen this year!" Harry yelled back, feeling thoroughly annoyed now. "The first was back on Halloween when we--"

Something in Harry's mind clicked into place. He slowly rounded on Quirrell, who was looking decidedly nervous now. "...when we had to go save Tonks after you burst into the Great Hall, saying there was a troll loose in the dungeons."

"I told you, I was p-p-patrolling the dungeons!" Quirrell exclaimed.

"Why?" Snape asked, sneering. "Was there something you were expecting to arrive that night? The dungeons are perfectly safe unless someone *lets* something in, you know..."

Quirrell looked back and forth between Snape and Quirrell. Things seemed to be falling into place faster and faster now. But before Harry could say anything further, a fourth voice filled the air. It was high and sent shivers down Harry's spine. Snape seemed to be affected, as well, as he suddenly turned as pale as a ghost, his eyes wide and fearful.

"Let me speak to him... face to face..."

It seemed to be coming from Quirrell's direction, though the Defense teacher wasn't moving his lips. Indeed, he seemed to be slightly confused now, as well. Eyes raised as if glancing to the ceiling, he murmured, "Master... are you sure? Are you strong enough...?"

"I...am strong enough... for *this*." Said the voice again.

And still, Snape seemed frozen to the spot. Harry gave him a bemused look before focusing his attention back on Quirrell, who had

reached up and was unravelling his turban. Once it was off, he slowly turned around.

What Harry saw would have made him scream out, if he could have made a sound at all. As it was, all he could do was stand and stare in horror at what he saw. On the back of Quirrell's bald head was a second face. It was whiter than even Snape's face currently was. It had thin, red eyes and slits for nostrils, giving it a rather snake-like appearance.

"Harry Potter..." Hissed the voice, the corners of its mouth raising slightly. "Look... at what I have been reduced to because of you..."

At once, Harry's scar exploded into pain, causing him to break eye contact with the snake-like face and clutch at it. It was the most horrid feeling Harry had ever experienced - almost as if someone were shoving white hot pokers through his forehead from the inside.

"A pathetic shadow of my former self... capable only of form when sharing another's body. There have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds. Everyone has a price, Potter!" Said the face, smiling in an almost demonic way now.

As Harry stumbled backwards, still clutching his forehead and barely taking in what the face was saying, it ordered Quirrell to turn to the side slightly. Quirrell did as he was told, leaving the face pointed towards Snape.

"Severus..." It said slowly, eyes narrowing. "You have constantly tried to halt our progress in attaining the Stone. Explain yourself."

"I had no idea, my Lord." Snape said quickly, somehow keeping his voice calm. "Had I known that--"

"*Silence!*" Hissed the face again. "Quirrell... show Severus the price he must pay for his perfidy..."

"Yes, Master." Quirrell said, spinning around and raising his wand at Snape once more, a grim smile on the man's face. "*Crucio!*"

Snape gasped as the spell hit him, dropping down to his knees and crying out for the briefest of moments. Hands clenched to fists and muscles screamed out in pain, but no sounds came from the potions master.

"You never did scream." Said the face in an almost disappointed tone. "Again."

"*Crucio!*" Quirrell cried again.

This time, the spell seemed to hit Snape harder than before. He let out a cry of anguish and dropped to all fours, wobbling slightly as the spell caused him such pain.

"**AGAIN!**" Roared the face.

"***CRUCIO!***"

The third strike was too much for Snape, who only briefly managed to lock eyes with Harry before crumpling entirely, his wand clattering down a few feet away from him.

Harry, who had only just stopped feeling pain coursing through his head, couldn't quite make out the look on his professor's face as the man fell. At this point, Harry supposed darkly, it didn't much matter.

"Now then... *COME HERE.*" Said the face. Quirrell was facing Harry again, though he could see the creature's face in...

Harry's eyebrows raised. So caught up in the fight between Snape and Quirrell, he never noticed an all-too-familiar sight. Standing just off to one side of Quirrell was the Mirror of Erised.

Quirrell narrowed his eyes at Harry and motioned towards the Mirror. "What does this mirror do? How does it work?" He asked, voice quiet. "I know it is the key to finding the Stone, but I cannot make it *work!*"

"Use him." Came the high-pitched voice on the back of the professor's head. "Use the boy!"

"Come here, Potter. Look in this mirror and tell me what you see!" Growled Quirrell, aiming his wand at Harry's chest.

Swallowing hard, Harry slowly crossed the room. He was no match for Quirrell and Voldemort. During the time when his scar had begun searing, he had experienced quick flashes of things he had only seen in his nightmares previously. Blurry faces, someone screaming, a green flash of light, and then...

And then there was that face, laughing hideously.

And Harry knew at that moment. Somehow, Voldemort had survived having the Killing Curse rebounded at him. Somehow, he had survived all of these years. And somehow, through whatever curse of bad luck, he had found Quirrell and merged with him.

He was completely outclassed, but he knew something neither Quirrell nor Voldemort knew. He knew how the Mirror worked. Maybe - just maybe - he would be able to deceive both of them. It was a long shot, and he would probably get killed if he was found out, but it was a chance he had to take. At the very least, it might buy some time... not that Harry felt that anyone was going to burst in and save him at the last minute. That seemed too convenient. And his life, he had learned over time, was anything but convenient.

Harry stepped up in front of the Mirror, Quirrell watching on with interest to his side. After a moment of silence, the Defense professor asked impatiently, "Well?! What do you see?!"

"I... I see my parents. I see myself winning the Quidditch Cup for Ravenclaw... I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore." Harry said.

However, even as he said these words, his reflection grinned back at him, producing a sizable red stone from somewhere behind his body. It tossed it from one hand to the other, gave the real Harry a wink, and dropped the stone into one of his pockets. As his reflection did this, Harry felt something heavy fall into his own pocket. He had somehow managed to get ahold of the Stone.

Quirrell scowled and shoved Harry out of the way. Harry fell hard onto the side that the Stone was hidden on. When he hit the floor, the soft

noise of something *other* than a human body hitting the ground filled the air. Harry swore inwardly.

Quirrell turned to him slowly, brows creased in confusion. "Potter. What was that sound?"

"It...it was my wand." Harry said.

"He lies!" Voldemort's face hissed. "**HE LIES! SEIZE HIM!**"

Quirrell charged at Harry. This was it - Harry was going to die and Quirrell, with Voldemort's face sticking out of the back of his head, was going to kill him and steal the Stone. Unable to get his wand around to shoot off any kind of spell, Harry brought up his arms and legs to try and keep Quirrell's hands off of him.

But Harry was an eleven year-old boy and Quirrell was a grown man with much longer limbs. Quirrell's hands reached out and grabbed hold of Harry's throat, squeezing as tightly as he could. Harry choked, grabbing at Quirrell's arms with his hands and trying to push the man away with his feet.

Something began to sizzle faintly. Suddenly, Quirrell let out a sharp cry of pain and took a stumbling step backward. Harry gasped, trying to refill his lungs with oxygen.

"What are you doing?!" Voldemort shrieked. "**SEIZE HIM!**"

"Master! I...I can't! My hands...!" Quirrell whimpered, gazing at his palms, which were now red and raw, as if he had placed them up directly into a fire. The robes covering his arms also seemed to have taken damage, as they had been burned through most of the way. The fabric was still giving off smoke.

"**KILL** him, then!" Voldemort howled. "Kill him and be done with it! We can take the Stone from his corpse!"

Quirrell grabbed painfully at his wand and aimed at Harry. Harry, of course, hadn't spent the entire time gaping at Quirrell's injuries - he had gotten up and was currently in a crouch, his own wand just out of

his reach. He could try making a grab for it, but what would come of that? He would be killed before he got to it.

Harry's mind raced, trying to work out what had caused Quirrell's injuries. His hands and robes had been fine before he grabbed Harry's throat and before Harry had grabbed his robes. Almost as if someone had held up a sign with the answer on it in large letters, it hit him. For whatever reason, Quirrell couldn't touch him!

Using his position to give himself momentum, Harry lunged for Quirrell, who had started hissing out the Killing Curse. Harry's hands shot out and grabbed ahold of Quirrell head before he managed to get off the last part of the spell, however. The reaction was almost instantaneous.

Quirrell let out a shrill cry of pain, his wand falling out of his hand as he raised them both to try prying Harry's hands away from his face. But Harry held on tight, his fingers spread out across the man's features. Through his screams, Quirrell gave up trying to get Harry's hands off of his face, choosing instead to resume choking Harry. If he couldn't get Harry off manually, he would choke the boy until he passed out, despite the excruciating pain he was in.

Harry wasn't sure how much more he could take. He was holding fast to Quirrell's face, which blistered and bubbles under and around his grip... But he was losing oxygen to his brain and was beginning to black out. As the darkness began to take him after what seemed like forever, Harry thought he heard a voice crying out to him. Whose voice, however, Harry couldn't work out. The only thing his oxygen-deprived brain could manage to think of as he fell unconscious was that he would never get to see his best friend's ever again.

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Author's Notes: I can't believe I made a whole chapter to get through those rooms. Tension building, I guess. Another cliffhanger of an ending, too. Aren't I just evil? Get used to it, folks, I have four more canonical books to get through. Six if Half-Blood Prince comes out before I get finished with OotP: Reassembled.

Also, I spent like twenty minutes doodling seven potion bottles and working out what container held what liquid. I suck wind at word problems, but I don't think there's any other way that Snape's challenge can be set up. Poison, Wine, (Small Bottle) Black Fire, Poison, Poison, (Large Bottle) Wine, Purple Fire. Go on, draw it for yourself and work the problem out on your own if you don't believe me. It BETTER be right for all the annoyance it was to work out.

This thing's 34.5kB, though it feels a lot longer. I wrote it all in one sitting just a single night after writing 21, which is unlike me. However, once I got rolling, I knew I couldn't stop, lest I lose my pace. I hope my version of the final chamber was adequate. I really like Snape as a character and thought it would make for interesting future events if he was there when Quirrellmort took off the turban. In addition, I have one more surprise to come from this battle. But that's for Chapter 23, I'm afraid. Until then, folks... Enjoy the cliffhanger. Mwahahaha!

Chapter 23 – Returning to Normal

Harry wasn't quite sure when he regained consciousness. He had a sinking suspicion that he was in the hospital wing, however. He was also aware of the fact that practically his whole body was aching for some reason. It took him awhile, but he eventually realized that something was pressed firmly up against his left side. Curiosity eventually got the better of him and he opened his eyes slightly.

"Ahh!"

After a few quick peeks, Harry tried again. With his eyes more adjusted to the brightness of the room, he was free to look and see what the heck was next to him. As he turned his head, he idly wondered why the devil hospital rooms always seemed to be white. Not a good color to wake up to.

All other thoughts ceased, however, when he realized what that 'something' pressed against him was - Tonks.

Curled up next to him, she had an arm draped up and against his chest slightly. Her head was resting halfway on the pillow and halfway on his left shoulder. The corners of her eyes seemed red and puffy, as if she had been crying for an extended period of time. Harry blushed.

"Tonks?" He whispered, bringing up his right hand to shake her, as his left was trapped against his side. "Tonks... oi, wake up..."

Tonks let out a sudden sniff and stirred slightly. Harry smiled, thinking she was waking up. He should have known better. With a murmur of "Jus' five more minutes, mummy..." She snuggled up better and promptly resumed sleeping.

Harry rolled his eyes and, as he tried forcing his blush away, began shaking her again. "Oi! I'm not your mum. Come on, Tonks, wake up!"

After a good minute of this, Harry scowled and whispered, "Nyyyyymyyy, it's time for breeeeeakfaaaast..."

"Don't call me 'Nymmy'..." Tonks grumbled, bringing a hand up to rub at her eyes. "Wh'time izzit?"

"Time to get off my arm so the blood can resume flowing to it?" Harry offered, smiling crookedly.

Tonks froze. Slowly, she tilted her head to look up at him. Her eyes were wide, as if she were just seeing him for the first time. She then blinked and looked down. Letting out an embarrassed squeak, Tonks quickly scooted back and sat up, staring down at the floor as Harry chuckled.

"Not funny." Tonks said. "Was worried 'bout you..."

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry... It's just... well..."

"You went off through the trapdoor after seeing Flitwick?" Tonks suggested.

"...Yeah. I suppose everyone knows what's happened?" Harry asked, sighing.

"You know how rumors spread in this place." Tonks said, putting a hand over one of Harry's and giving it a bit of a squeeze.

"So... what happened, anyway? Last thing I remember was trying to burn Quirrell's face off with my *hands*, somehow...and him trying to choke me out before I beat him..." Harry said, a shiver running down his spine at the memory.

"Well, it's like this, I think. I got up in the middle of the night, 'cause somethin' felt weird. Ever get that feeling? Anyway, I wanted to go for a walk, so I had Walt lemme out... only he said *you* left a bit earlier and hadn't come back. I got to worrying an' eventually went to Flitwick. After that, I went to write to Dumbledore an' he went to get McGonagall..." Tonks said, leaning back on her arms as she spoke.

"I ran down from the Owlery to the third floor corridor after that, an' both Flitwick and McGonagall were already there. He wouldn't lemme go very far, but what I *did* see scared me pretty bad... Who did that to

the dog?" Tonks continued, looking to Harry as she asked her question.

"Fluffy? I guess it was Quirrell..." Harry said, sighing. "I almost felt sorry for it..."

"*FLUFFY?*" Tonks asked, goggling at her friend.

"Hagrid named it, not me." Harry said with a shrug.

"McGonagall was just coming back to say something when Dumbledore showed up. He looked *really* furious, too. Remember how he looked when he shot down that troll? Multiply that by about a hundred an' that's how he looked. He didn't say anything, he just flew down the hallway faster than a guy his age has any business moving... and hopped down the trapdoor." Tonks explained.

"I thought I heard a voice right before I blacked out..." Harry said. "...Wonder if Snape's alright."

"Snape?"

"Yeah... didn't Dumbledore bring him and Quirrell up, too?" Harry asked, somewhat confused.

"Dunno. When I caught sight of you, looking so limp, I... Um... I kinda lost it." Tonks said, looking off and blushing slightly. "You looked so limp in his arms. I grabbed at your hand when he carried you by and followed you all the way up. Wouldn't let go of it for anything, not even Madam Pomfrey..."

Harry noticed for the first time that he was still in his robes instead of in some of the hospital's pajamas. "Ahh..." He said.

"Yeah... well, I wouldn't leave, either. Pomfrey tried glaring me out, but I wasn't gonna leave. I...um... guess I kinda fell asleep. Sorry 'bout that."

Harry shook his head. "S'okay, Tonks... really. I'm actually touched that you cared enough to stay with me the whole time..."

"Yeah, well..." Tonks said, shaking her head. "Anyway, only news I've gotten from outside this place came from Leon. He appointed himself as the doorman to the hospital wing between his classes. And when he wasn't there, Hermione was."

"Really? That's surprising..."

"She looked about as upset as I did." Tonks said, grinning a little. "I hear she actually threatened to hex one of her dorm mates that wanted a peek at you."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Every so often, one of the two'll tote in a large supply of cards and sweets an' stuff." Tonks said, hopping to her feet an' tugging the curtain to the next bed over back. On it was a small feast of sweets of all shapes and sizes, along with what seemed like dozens of cards. Harry gaped.

"All that's for *me*?" He managed, staring at the pile.

"Well, I'd hoped you'd be a gentleman and share it with your best mates, y'know." Tonks said, jutting her bottom lip out as far as it could go. Harry laughed.

"Of course I'll share, stop doing that! If I tried eating all of that, I'd wind up right back in here to get my stomach pumped or something." He said, looking back at the pile. "...I still wish I knew what happened to Snape and Quirrell, though."

"Gonna tell me what happened down there? I only know how things started and how they've ended. You've gotta fill me in on what happened between the two points..." Tonks said.

"A fine idea... but, if I may, I would like to hear, as well." Came an old, familiar voice from nearby.

Dumbledore strode over, smiling pleasantly. "I'm glad to see you up and about, Harry." He said, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir..." Harry said. "...Alright, if I tell you what happened before you showed up, will you tell me what happened after I blacked out?"

"Consider it a deal." Said the headmaster, walking around to the side of the bed Tonks wasn't on and sitting down.

"Well... when I got into the final chamber, I saw Snape and Quirrell with their wands aimed on each other. Both kept trying to get me to stun the other or something... Um... I kinda chose the wrong person to trust..." Harry said, wincing slightly. "Quirrell took off his turban and... and I know this is going to sound bizarre, but he had a face sticking out of the back of his head!"

"A face?" Tonks asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Voldemort's, I think... I'm not a hundred percent sure what happened to Snape, because my scar started hurting worse than it ever has. Even with all that's happened to me back at Number Four, I've never hurt as badly as I did then. I tried fighting off the pain so I could stay conscious... I know Voldemort... or Quirrell, one of the two... was yelling something at Snape. When I came to, Snape was down and twitching, sort of..."

Dumbledore nodded slowly at this, but said nothing. When Harry looked to him, he simply nodded, indicating for Harry to continue.

"Anyway, after that, Quirrell turned to me and ordered me to tell him how the Mirror worked. Not sure what he meant, exactly, but... I felt like I should try and convince him I didn't know. So I walked up and lied about what I saw." Harry said.

"And what did you see?" Dumbledore asked, softly.

"I saw myself...with the Philosopher's Stone, sir." Harry answered. "...I'm not really sure what happened after that. You see, I saw my reflection drop the Stone into his pocket... and then I felt a weight sink down in *mine*. Quirrell shoved me out of the way and I fell on that side... the Stone made a noise when I landed, which made him look over. Voldemort yelled for him to get me..."

Licking his lips and taking a deep breath, Harry continued, "He charged over and started choking me. I grabbed at his arms and tried kicking him away, but I wasn't strong enough. Odd thing, though... he backed off a few seconds later, yelling something about his hands. Not sure what that was all about, either... He couldn't seem to touch me, for some reason.

"So when Quirrell aimed his wand and started what was probably the Killing Curse, I lunged at him and grabbed his face as hard as I could. He screamed and dropped his wand, trying to pry my fingers loose. When that didn't work, he started choking me again... he kept with it that time, though... and I eventually passed out. Next time I know, I'm in the hospital wing..." Harry finished.

Dumbledore nodded again, then smiled. "Harry," he began, "I must confess that I am astounded at what you have managed to do. Not only were you able to hold off Voldemort until I returned, but you also managed to protect the Stone and keep it out of his grasp..."

"But how, sir?" Harry asked, brows creased. "How did I get the Stone?"

"Ah, yes..." Said Dumbledore, smiling pleasantly. "That was one of my more brilliant ideas, if you don't mind an old man saying so. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone - find it, but not use it - would be able to get it... Elsewise, they would simply see themselves making Elixir of Life... or making gold. Quite possibly both, if my knowledge of less than noble people serves me."

"And why couldn't Quirrell touch me?" Harry then asked, storing the information just given to him for a later, more relaxing time.

At this, the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes seemed to fade for the briefest of moments. "That, Harry, is because of your mother's love for you. She died to save you, understand. If there is anything that Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. Lily loved you deeply, Harry. Love such as this will leave its own mark on us. Quirrell, so far gone as he was and sharing his being with Voldemort could not touch you for this reason. To touch a person marked by something so good must have caused him great agony..."

Harry nodded, staring down at his lap. It hurt to think of his parents too much. It brought back the memories he had of sitting in front of the very Mirror he had received the Stone from. Thinking of this, however, brought one last question to Harry's lips.

"Professor? What's going to happen to the Stone? It doesn't feel like it's in my pocket anymore..."

Dumbledore smiled again. "I was wondering if you would ask. I removed the Stone shortly after bringing you here. It has been decided, I am afraid, that the Stone is too dangerous a thing to exist."

"It's been destroyed...?" Harry asked. "But... what about Flamel and his wife? I mean, won't they die...?"

"You know about Nicolas, do you?" Dumbledore said, grinning now. "Well, Harry... Nicolas and I had a little chat. He was the one to ask that I destroy the Stone. He and Perenelle have enough Elixir to get their affairs in order... but then, yes, they will die..."

"But you know, Harry... Nicolas once told me something. He said that, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. And, I feel, after living so very long, they are both eagerly awaiting the journey ahead of them."

"What of Quirrell and Snape?"

"Severus is recovering well in his office, despite Poppy's numerous attempts to get him to stay." Dumbledore said, a smile still in place. "If nothing else, Severus is strong in both body and mind. The curse he was hit with was a powerful one, but he has survived it in the past, more times than I'm sure we would all care to remember. Quirinus, on the other hand, did not end up quite as well. With Voldemort in his mind, slowly driving him insane, he refused to let go of you, even after I arrived. I had to literally pry his fingers from your throat and was fearful I was too late in doing so for a time. His face was badly disfigured, as well as his hands. When he fell, no signs of Voldemort could be seen on his body...and I assume that his spirit decided to vacate before it was too late, as it were..."

"Currently, Quirinus is in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries and is in critical condition... but hope is high that he will survive. Unfortunately, due to the actions he took while under Voldemort's influence, he will most likely be sent to Azkaban when he recovers." Dumbledore finished.

Harry slumped back in bed, shutting his eyes and letting out a long breath. "I'm just glad it's over with... Professor? Could I ask something a bit... odd? A sort of request..."

Dumbledore tilted his head.

"Um...could you ask that no one else brings me anything? I'm going to have a time of finishing off the sweets I already have, even with splitting it up. And I'm sure it'll take an hour or two to get through all of the cards..." Harry said, making a face.

Dumbledore rose and walked over to inspect the pile of sweets for himself, chuckling quietly. "I will try, Harry. But I'm afraid your admirers will find ways to sneak more to you. ...Ahh, what's this? Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans... You know, I used to be quite the fan of these..."

"Used to be?" Tonks asked.

"I am afraid I was unfortunate enough to run across a vomit-flavored one." Dumbledore said, opening the package and peering into it. "But, I think, I might try once more... perhaps I would be safe with a toffee-flavored bean..."

Dumbledore pulled out a harmless-looking bean, inspected it briefly, then popped it into his mouth. A moment later, his face scrunched up as he swallowed hard. "Alas," he said, coughing once, "Bunion."

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When Harry was released from Madam Pomfrey's care days later, he headed straight for the Ravenclaw common room to wait for his friends to return from classes. It felt good to be back to more comfortable surroundings, he thought as he slipped into his favorite

chair. While he still had more than half of his sweets left, he had managed to get through all of the cards that had been sent to him.

Tonks and Solieyu came back within the hour, along with a half dozen other Ravenclaws. Seeing Harry lost in a book, Tonks rushed over and practically hopped on his lap to give him a fierce hug. She had visited every day, but seemed worried that she would show up one day and he would be gone again. Harry let out a squawk of surprise, his book sailing through the air. Solieyu caught it, an amused look on his face.

"Oi, gerroff, Tonks!" Harry said, blushing as he realized how much attention the two were getting.

Tonks blushed and quickly slipped onto the arm of the chair, but smiled. "Sorry... it's good to see you out of the hospital wing, that's all..."

"Warn me next time?" Harry asked, taking his book back when Solieyu held it out.

"You want there to *be* a next time?" Said the long-haired boy, eyebrows raised.

Harry glared at him. Tonks blushed and stared off towards the fireplace.

"You know, she did better than Dumbledore at keeping presents and such away." Solieyu commented, nodding toward Tonks. "You should have seen her. A pair of 6th year Gryffindor girls were planning to stop by and drop something off. Tonks overheard them and went into a fury, telling them in no uncertain terms that she'd 'hex them 'til their pink bits fell off.' I've never seen a pair of sixteen year olds run off like they did. She also gave a few Ravenclaws the Evil Eye and growled at a Hufflepuff girl to leave you alone..."

Then, almost as an afterthought, Solieyu grinned and added, "Your girlfriend sure is bossy."

"Shut up!" Harry said, staring down at his lap and trying not to blush again.

"You keep that up and I'll hex *your* pink bits off." Tonks snarled, glaring daggers at Solieyu, who chuckled and walked off, shaking his head.

"I'll be up in the dorm studying if you need me." He said before disappearing up the stairs.

"Girlfriend..." Harry said, groaning. "That's all we need. A rumor that you're my girlfriend. You'd have the female half of the school against you..."

Tonks, who had been staring at the spot Solieyu had been in moments before, suddenly looked back to Harry, grinning. "Oh, I dunno. Might be worth it to see the looks on their faces. Whatcha think, Harry? Care to have me falling all over you tomorrow at breakfast?"

"Urg, Tonks... don't encourage theeeeemmm..." Harry whined, burying his face in his hands.

Tonks patted his back and tried very hard not to giggle out loud.

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It wasn't until a week later that Harry found something strange. He was changing into the robes he had been wearing the day he faced off against Quirrell when, by chance, his hand slipped into the pocket that the Stone had been dropped into by his reflection. For a moment, it felt as if nothing was wrong. As he was drawing his hand back out, however, something dug into his palm, causing him to draw in a hissed breath.

Frowning, Harry pulled the pocket out and peered into it. When he figured out what had cut him, he gasped. Reaching in, Harry pulled out a smallish, red shard - one that had previously been a part of the Philosopher's Stone.

Jagged on both ends and very smooth on the sides, the shard was barely the length of his pinky finger and just slightly wider. Thinking back, Harry assumed it must have happened when Quirrell shoved him to

the floor right after he had been given the Stone. Crashing to the ground must have chipped off a small portion that Dumbledore seemed not to have noticed when he had retrieved the rest of the Stone from Harry's pocket.

Harry gazed at the shard for a few minutes, almost entranced by how beautiful it was. He almost wished that he had gotten a good look at the rest of the Stone, for it had felt quite heavy in his pocket. But now, Harry was faced with a decision - should he tell Dumbledore what he had found, or should he keep the shard? After staring at the shard for a few minutes longer, Harry eventually decided that he would pose the question to Tonks and Solieyu.

Unfortunately, due to the amount of homework being given these days, it took almost another week before he remembered to ask them to meet with him in an empty classroom somewhere.

"So what's this about?" Solieyu asked, leaning against the door to the room they had ducked into. "You seemed nervous."

"Well," Harry began, looking around the room to make sure that no one was lurking behind a spare desk or something, "You know how I said I got pushed by Quirrell down in the final room?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I think the Stone fractured when I landed, because I was getting on the robe I had been wearing that day when I found this." Harry said, carefully pulling the shard from his pocket. Tonks gasped and Solieyu raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Is that really a piece of it?" Tonks asked, stepping closer to look. Harry held it out to her, warning that the ends were quite sharp.

"Guess so." Harry said. "It's the right color and I dunno where e/se I would pick up something like that. Anyway, I was hoping to get some input from you two on what I should do with it... On one hand, I think I should tell Dumbledore, since he said that he and Flamel decided that the Stone should be destroyed. On the other..."

"You want a memento?" Solieyu supplied. Harry nodded.

"Yeah, something like that." Harry said. "I dunno what I'd do with something like that and I certainly wouldn't go around saying I had it, but... I dunno. A part of me just really wants to keep it."

"I don't blame ya, it's beautiful!" Tonks said, holding the shard up to the light coming in through one of the room's windows, causing it to sparkle.

"I don't see what the harm in it would be." Solieyu said, looking from the Stone to Harry. "As long as you don't plan on making gold or turning yourself immortal."

Harry groaned, shaking his head. "I've got more gold in my vault at Gringott's than I know what to do with. And I can't even begin to imagine living as long as Flamel has..."

"You two would... look amusing at six hundred and sixty-five years old, I'm sure." Solieyu said, masking a grin rather poorly.

"Oh, sod off, Leon." Tonks grumbled. "Keep it, mate... just don't tell anyone else about it."

Harry looked to each of his friends, back at the Stone shard... then grinned and nodded. "Alright, I'll keep it. I'll hide it at the bottom of my trunk, under all my other stuff. That should do it."

With that particular problem out of the way, the trio headed off to find Fred and George Weasley. Ron had returned to the school recently and was, for the most part, now behaving. Every so often, Harry caught the redhead glaring his way. Hermione hadn't reported him starting in on her again, and Harry was going to make sure things stayed that way.

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"Harry! Leon! *NYMMMYYYYYY*!" Cried the twins when they saw the trio approaching. They were out near Hagrid's hut, discussing something quietly when Harry and his friends approached. Tonks glared at them.

"Don't call me Nymmy!" She roared.

"Awww, alright, Nymmy." Said Fred.

"Won't ever use it again, Nymmy, you can count on us!" Said George, saluting the 11 year old girl formally.

Tonks scowled.

"Alright there, 'Arry?" Hagrid said, sounding a bit nervous.

"Uh, yeah..." Harry said, not quite meeting the half-giant's gaze.

Solieyu nudged Harry, forcing him back to the reason he was there in the first place. "Oh, right. Sorry... Fred, George, we were just wondering how your little brother's been doing since getting back."

The twins exchanged a glance, both smiling. Fred made a vague gesture with his left hand as he said, "Oh, you know... very Ron-like."

"He's not picking on Hermione, if that's whatcha meant." Said George. "Mum sent us a letter, saying exactly what happened while he was back at The Burrow."

"Where?" Harry asked.

"The Burrow. S'what we call our home." Fred explained. "Anyway, mum had him de-gnoming the garden from sun-up to sun-down one day, made him manually do all the chores in the house for the whole of the time he was there, and actually sent him off to one of her old schoolmates who became a disciplinarian!"

"Ickle Ronniekins got a lesson on manners." George said, snickering. "I don't think he wants to go through *that* again."

"He's trying a lot harder to keep his big yap shut." Fred said, looking thoughtful. "...Anyway, is that all you wanted to ask?"

"Actually, we were hoping you could pull Number Seven Opposite on him." Tonks chimed in, smiling.

"Seven Opposite?" Fred asked, then thought for a minute. "Ahh, wasn't that the one where...?"

"Yup! We talked it over and thought it only fitting. In addition, there's something new we'd like to add to it... specifically thought up with Ron in mind." Harry said, trying his best to smile innocently.

For his part, Hagrid just listened in, looking outright baffled at the conversation that was going on.

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The next morning, Harry, Tonks, and Solieyu entered the Great Hall to loud laughter. The three had practiced their best poker faces the night before and also before heading down. Calmly, they went to their usual spots at the end of the Ravenclaw table. Only then did they turn to see what was so funny...

Ron Weasley, dressed in Slytherin-green robes, seemed to be yelling at his older twin brothers from his spot at the Gryffindor table. 'Seemed to' because he was looking down at the moment. In his left hand, he held open a book and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off of it. His right hand was attempting to get at some food, but as he couldn't see his plate properly, he was having a time of it.

"Ronald Weasley - Git, Slytherin, and total bookworm." Tonks murmured under her breath as she began nibbling on a piece of toast. "Ahh.

feels good to get that outta my system."

"It's less than he deserves... but the humiliation could do him some good." Said Harry, equally as quiet.

"You two are going to be the death of me." Solieyu murmured, rolling his eyes as he stabbed at a bit of sausage on his plate and pushing it around.

"Hermione seems to be amused, in any case." Tonks said, nodding towards the bushy-haired girl, who had a hand over her mouth so as not to appear to be outright laughing. "S'a nice sight, really. She spent too much time this year in a sad mood."

"Justice has been served, I think." Harry said, smiling.

"I dare say it has." Said an old voice from directly behind Harry.

The trio jumped. None had heard or seen the headmaster sneak up behind them. He was looking across the room at Ron over his half-moon glasses, a faint smile on the corners of his mouth. "Harry, a word, if I may?"

"Um... sure. I'll be right back, guys." Harry said, getting up and following Dumbledore out into the Entrance Hall.

"Should I assume that you three have been the masterminds behind the Weasley Twins' pranks this year?" Dumbledore asked, smiling down at Harry, who looked off.

"Um... well, a few of them." Harry admitted.

"Most concerning Mr. Malfoy, correct?"

"Yeah..."

There was a silence, then, "Harry, I must ask you a few questions."

Harry grinned slightly. "I believe you already have... but feel free, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed I have. Ahh, while I am glad you are in such a good mood, Harry... I fear that you may not be in such a state after I finish with my questioning..."

"Sir?" Harry asked, tilting his head.

"You see, Harry... When you defeated Voldemort when you were just a baby... he vanished. Most believed him to be dead. But, as you saw with your own eyes, he is not. Not quite, in any case. He lives on in some bodiless form, most likely drifting from host body to host body in search of a way to return to his own..." Dumbledore began, walking with Harry toward the front doors of the school, which opened on their own as they approached.

"You may have wondered why you were left with your aunt, uncle, and cousin after your parents died. It was for a very simple reason... wards protect Number Four, Privet Drive, from anyone who might

with to do harm to you. They were created over time, as I and others working for or with me saw fit. However, in order to keep the wards active, you must return for a time each year after finishing your schooling here at Hogwarts..."

Harry turned to stare at the old wizard as the two walked out onto school grounds. "Go back to the Dursleys?" He asked, his voice a pitch or two higher than normal. "You can't... You know what they did to me! What are they going to think if I suddenly show up after a year of being gone?"

"I have already written to them, rest assured... They will not cause you problems any longer, Harry. Not unless they want me to personally pay them a visit. I assure you, you will be perfectly safe there." Said Dumbledore, putting a hand on Harry's right shoulder and offering a squeeze.

"No, you don't know them like I do..." Harry said, darkly. "They'll go back to... well, to beating me... the moment I step through the door. Can't I stay with Tonks and her mum? Can't the wards be switched to *their* house?"

"I am afraid not, Harry." Said the headmaster, a hint of sadness in his voice. "They are free to visit you at any time, however... indeed, I think it would be wise for Andromeda to help keep an eye on you. Knowing that you're being watched by a fully grown witch, a fully grown wizard, and one very protective and energetic young girl might just be enough to hold their hands in preventing anything bad from further befalling you..."

Harry sighed. He had tried not to think about what would happen once the school year ended. It wasn't far away, and he didn't enjoy the thought of having to return to the place that still gave him nightmares. Slipping his hands into his pockets, he asked, "How long do I have to stay before I can go back to Tonks' place?"

"Three weeks, minimum, I'm afraid." Said Dumbledore. "I plan to write to Andromeda tonight and ask for her assistance in this matter. I'm sure she'll help keep you safe until you *can* leave. While I wish there were something to be done about this arrangement, I cannot change

the past. I hope you'll understand why this has to be done this way, Harry..."

"Yeah... I understand." Harry said, feeling his shoulders slump. "But it doesn't mean I have to like it."

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Author's Notes: Heyyy, guess what? ONE CHAPTER LEFT! All the main story for Retrasmuted is over, folks! We've made it, and I've tipped the scales at over 100,000 words for, I think, the very first time. This fic's also been the most reviews I've ever had at one time, which I'm very appreciative of. Hearing the various comments and reading on what you guys think might happen next is always good incentive to hurry up.

To those who've asked, I suppose I SHOULD have mentioned it here before... I mention on my author page that I AM planning to continue this AU storyline through more than just book 1. In fact, I plan to take this through seventh year and possibly beyond. Like Rowling, I already have the final bit of Book 7 written out. It'll drive people up the wall, and I eagerly await getting to it to see the reactions. In addition, as of this moment, I'm not sure whether I'll be doing an original 6th year or if I'll be going off of Half-Blood Prince. It all depends on whether JKR finishes it before I get to the end of writing Order Reassembled.

I'm glad people like Leon. I have interesting things planned for him in the future. That's one of the hard parts of writing these early books - no one knows any powerful spells yet. Tsk. Anyway, enjoy the Honks moments in this chapter. I've got a question I'm going to throw out to you guys at the end of 24, but I feel kinda awkward about it. Ah well. I'll go write that part of the author's notes for 24 now and get it outta the way. Seeya then, everyone!

Chapter 24 – Unfinished Dreams

The rest of the school year passed at an incredibly quick pace for Harry. The final holiday of the school year had long since come and gone and the rumors of what happened between he, Snape, and Quirrell had died out. Though he still got the occasional wink or kiss blown to him from one of the random girls at the school, it was far less than it had been at the very start.

After the incident involving the Slytherin-colored robes and the book, Ron had mellowed out considerably. He had even gone so far as to offer Hermione a public apology in the Gryffindor common room one day. Hermione hadn't forgiven him, though she did appreciate the gesture.

Nothing had changed with Solieyu. He still frequently left the Tower in the dead of night, only to show back up before classes the following morning. Harry had made another futile attempt to follow his friend, but had somehow managed to lose the boy in the space of a couple of hallways. Harry still wasn't sure how.

Tonks had become closer to Harry after his ordeal. It wasn't uncommon to find the two reading together in the Tower. She still helped keep the other girls away from Harry, much to his relief. She and Harry had fallen back into a more familiar pattern of going to classes, reading, and Harry practicing his Metamorphmagus skills. During the final week of school, Harry managed to turn his hair to a sandy brown color and back again, much to Tonks' glee.

Fred and George, by the end of the school year, had pulled off roughly one third of the pranks on The List and promised that they were thinking of new ideas every day. They also promised to help make sure that 'ickle Ronniekins' kept himself in line over the summer.

Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup that year, mostly due to Harry being stuck in the hospital wing during a key match. Likewise, though Harry had earned a good 75 points for keeping Quirrell from getting to the Stone, it wasn't enough to win Ravenclaw the House Cup. And due to Ron's constant fighting during the first half of the school year, Gryffindor didn't win it, either. For the first time in what was

apparently a long time, Hufflepuff was awarded the House Cup. Harry couldn't recall a time when he had ever seen Professor Sprout so happy.

Though he tried keeping up appearances, Harry was dreading the end of the school year. He and Dumbledore had spent a long time talking about just why he had to return there every year. Andromeda had written to Harry shortly after Dumbledore brought the topic up, saying that she would certainly help to ensure that he wasn't treated poorly anymore. Tonks had also agreed to help, saying that she would come over as often as Harry wanted her to. Harry felt quite a bit of relief at all of this, though he still wasn't looking forward to the return to Privet Drive.

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"I can't believe it's time to go already..." Tonks said, wistfully, as she flopped down into her seat on the Hogwarts Express.

Harry sat down between Tonks and the window, nodding slowly. "I can't believe I survived." He said under his breath.

Solieyu had the other seat in the compartment to himself and sat with his legs stretched across it, rolling his eyes. "I can't believe you two still can't see what's happening between you."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, blinking.

"What did we tell ya about not makin' any sense, Leon?" Tonks said, smiling crookedly.

Solieyu shook his head and chuckled. "I suppose it'll take awhile longer before you catch on. I hereby reserve the exclusive right to say 'I told you so' when something *does* finally happen."

"Oh, shut up..." Tonks muttered.

Harry listened to his friends go back and forth for awhile before tuning them out and gazing out the window. To him, the trip back to King's Cross couldn't take long enough. He idly wondered why neither he nor Tonks really knew where Solieyu actually lived. He made it a

point in his mind to write and ask sometime. He thought that he would need something to help kill time when Tonks wasn't around.

He wasn't sure when he had shut his eyes, but when he opened them again, it was dark out and they were almost back at King's Cross. Solieyu was still stretched out and seemed to be reading something. Tonks was slumped against Harry's side, her head having lolled over onto his shoulder. Harry could hear her breathing slowly and assumed her to be asleep. Looking back across the compartment, he murmured, "How long has she been out?"

"Not long after you." Said Solieyu without looking up from his book. "She said something about thinking that she was going to need her rest..."

"Ahh..." Harry replied, shifting to get more comfortable as slowly as possible, so as not to wake his best friend. "You know, I don't think either of us have ever asked where you live, Leon..."

Solieyu looked over at Harry, eyebrows raised slightly. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've asked where you two live, either. We don't seem to be very *bright* Ravenclaws..."

"Yeah, we're bad at this." Harry said, grinning. "Me and Tonks live in Surrey... what about you?"

"Well, you're closer to London than my family is, then." Solieyu said, stretching slightly and producing a painful crack around his collarbone. "Oww... anyway, we live up near Ipswich. Dreadfully boring, really..."

"I know how that feels. The only thing of interest around Privet Drive is a small park. It's where I met Tonks last summer, actually." Harry said, looking over at his sleeping friend again. "Glad I did, too..."

"I'm sorry that you have to go back to those awful relatives of yours." Solieyu said, shaking his head. "If I lived closer, I would visit as often as I'm sure Tonks plans to."

"It's alright. It's just nice knowing I actually have friends and a *real* life to come back to after the summer's over. And I don't have to be there *all* the time... Tonks' mum said she had some kind of plan in the

works to help make sure that the Dursleys don't do anything to me again. She wouldn't say what, though..." Harry said, frowning.

"Well, if her mother is anything like she is, then I feel sorry for your relatives." Solieyu said, grinning slightly as he resumed reading.

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"Nnn, dun wanna wake up... g'way..." Tonks whined as Harry tried waking her up. The Hogwarts Express had stopped five minutes prior and he was still having difficulty waking his friend.

"Alright, then." Harry grumbled. "Time to go, ickle Nymmykins! Gotta get you back to your mummy! -- **OW!**"

Tonks had smacked Harry in the chest, grumbling something about not calling her 'Nymmy' as she sat up straight. "S'goin' on?" She asked, groggily.

"Time to get off the train." Harry said, scowling as he rubbed his chest. "Next time I'll just shoot some water at you."

"You do an' you'll get more than a swat on the chest. Oi, where's Leon at?" Tonks asked, noticing that their long-haired friend was no longer in their compartment.

"He had to go to catch a bus back home. He really had to move fast, too - the next bus wouldn't have been by for about an hour or so. He told me to say goodbye to you for him, though. He should be writing us sometime soon." Harry explained. "His mum's working and his dad... well, he didn't say much about his dad, but he didn't look too happy when I asked about him."

"Sounds familiar." Tonks grumbled, standing up. "Well, let's get going. Mum's probably wonderin' where we are."

The two got their trunks and made their way off of the train. There were still plenty of students both on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters and inside of the train, much to their surprise. Harry had figured that both places would have been fairly vacated by now.

Andromeda waved to them when she caught sight of the two, running over and scooping up Tonks into a tight hug. "Ohh, I missed you so much, Nymmy! It's been too quiet about the house without you constantly getting into everything."

"*MUUUUM!*" Tonks whined, trying to push her mother away. "C'mon, mum, you're embarassing me!"

Andromeda grinned, but let her daughter go, turning to hug Harry almost as hard. "And you! You look so much better than you did last summer, Harry! How've you been?"

"Mum, knock it off! You can ask on the way home, can't you?" Tonks asked, looking around to see if anyone was watching her mother be so utterly melodramatic.

"I'm fine...really..." Harry said, biting back a grin at Tonks' embarassment. "I'd be better if I didn't have to go back to Number Four, though."

"Oh, don't you worry about those relatives of yours." Andromeda said, a sly smile forming on her face. "I've got everything thought out. You just wait and see. Get through the first night back and you'll be fine."

"What're you planning?" Harry asked. He had tried getting the woman to tell him numerous times during the last few weeks at Hogwarts, but she had kept silent on the issue.

"Telling you would only ruin the surprise." Andromeda said, smiling still. "Well, come on then, you two. Car's waiting and it's already dark out!"

The trio passed back through the barrier to King's Cross, Harry still trying to get Tonks' mother to tell him what her plan was. "You know" he said, looking around the busy train station, "I wish I could stay at your house tonight and go back in the morning. Facing the Dursleys in the dark isn't something I really feel up to."

"Oh, you'll do fine." Andromeda assured him. "I dunno how they feel about magic... but you could always threaten to turn them into toads if they tried to hurt you..."

"But I dunno how to do that." Harry said, confused. "And besides, we aren't allowed to do magic out of school..."

"You know that, and I know that... but do they?" Andromeda asked, looking pointedly at Harry.

"No..." Harry said slowly, a grin starting to form. "No, they don't."

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"I'm gonna miss you!" Tonks said, suddenly, as they pulled their trunks out of Andromeda's car. Harry still had to lug his back to Privet Drive, something he wasn't looking forward to. Andromeda had quickly fixed this problem, however, by conjuring a couple of small wheels that attached to one side of his trunk. Wheeling it around was definitely much easier than dragging it.

"You'll see me tomorrow." Harry pointed out to his friend.

"Yeah, but still. I'm gonna miss you." Tonks repeated, looking down at the ground. It was too dark to really tell, even with the street lights on, but Harry could have sworn that he saw Tonks blushing.

"Besides, I get up early. Around 6 in the morning, usually. If you're up that early, feel free to come and drag me away." Harry said.

"Oh, I doubt I'll get much sleep. Be too busy worrying about you..." Tonks replied.

"Alright, you two, don't look so glum. I'll tell you what I'm planning once we get inside, Nymmy. That ought to help your worry. And Harry, dear, you don't worry, either. Have yourself a good breakfast in the morning, in fact."

"The Dursleys would lynch me if I tried eating enough to get full." Harry grumbled.

"Point your wand at them and say you could always turn *them* into food?" Tonks suggested.

Harry snorted. "As amusing as that would be, I think I'll pass. Uncle Vernon and Dudley are nothing but fat and Aunt Petunia wouldn't have enough meat to make a sandwich. I could always threaten to transfigure Dudley into a real pig, though..."

"That's the spirit!" Andromeda said, grinning. "Right. It's been a long day and a long trip for you two. Nymmy, go on inside and wash up for supper. Harry, good luck on dealing with those awful muggles tonight. We'll be by tomorrow, bright and early. I promise."

"Alright." Harry said, nodding. He turned to head off up the sidewalk but was interrupted by Tonks bounding over and throwing her arms around him. Squeezing tightly, she whispered that he better keep himself safe that night.

Before Harry could ask what was up with Tonks' odd behavior, she had let go and rushed into the house. Andromeda had an eyebrow raised, but otherwise offered no insight into her daughter's randomness. Figuring that he would never be able to figure women out, Harry said goodnight to Andromeda and set off up the sidewalk again.

He wasn't sure what Andromeda had in store for his relatives, but he was eager to see it. He only prayed that he would be able to make it through the night. He wasn't even sure that threatening his relatives would work. He figured his Aunt Petunia might recognize a wand, since she had probably seen his mum's often enough... but he wasn't going to rely on a bit of *possible* information to get him through the night unharmed.

He had survived eleven years of torment and abuse at the hands of the Dursleys. He had been rescued and learned he was a wizard. He had gone to a wizarding school and survived the whole year there, despite the numerous close encounters. He also had friends for the first time in his life.

As Harry approached Number Four some fifteen minutes later, he stared at the house for a moment before walking towards the front door. He was nothing if not a survivor. He had lived eleven years in this hellhole - one more night wasn't going to do him in. He wouldn't let it. He had too much to stay alive for now, after all. And his friends'

sadness aside, if he up and got himself killed, he was sure that Malfoy would never let Tonks and Solieyu hear the end of it.

Taking a deep breath, Harry brought a hand up and knocked three times.

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Author's Notes: And there we have it, guys! I'm DONE! I want to thank everyone who sat down and read through all of this. I promise that the sequels will wind up even longer. I'm gonna make this the biggest Honks series on the whole of FFN, even if it kills me! We need more fluff instead of random RagingHormones!Harry. I also want to thank my beta, Gabriel Shans again, for sticking with my odd and often annoying schedule of sending him new parts to look over.

Now, I have a couple things to go over really quick before I leave you.

First, I'm taking a small break. It will be two weeks, at most, and I'll most likely still work on chapter during this time. I can't just sit and NOT write for this thing. This will do two things. It'll let me get one or, hopefully, two chapters ahead, so that I can take things at a slower, calmer pace. Don't worry, just keep an eye out and you'll see The Chamber of Secrets: Reopened show up soon.

Second, and this is the odd bit I was mentioning in the previous chapter's notes... I've read a number of good fics that have had fanart done for them. And, not being at the level of being able to draw hair and bodies properly enough, I can't make art for this thing myself. I'd really be honored if one of my readers felt like doodling up various scenes or something. There are just some scenes that stick out in my mind that I'd adore seeing in a pic... Harry meeting Tonks for the first time, Tonks curled up next to Harry in the hospital wing after the Stone incident... and possibly any prank involving Malfoy. I dunno. Maybe Leon's little duel with Malfoy in the Entrance Hall...

I hate to ask, though. To me, at least, it sounds... I dunno. Somehow inappropriate, I suppose, is the best way to put it. Then again, I always tend to feel awkward throwing questions out to a large group of people. It's just how I am. Anyway, best just to forget about that little ramble. Oh, and to GundamNymph - Leon's eyes are gold.

Coulda swore I wrote that in somewhere other than the little original chara guide I jotted up. Whoopsy. It's nice to know a character I made is inspiring someone to draw, really...

So that's it. It's been a pretty interesting trip for me. Hopefully, book 2 will be a little longer. There are certain things I'm going to change, certain events I'm going to play around with... and certain professors I'm going to have a LOT of fun writing. It helps that I can start to slowly advance Harry and Tonks' relationship. I've got plenty of fluff scene ideas and nowhere to put 'em currently. Le sigh.

What does Andromeda have planned? Will the Dursleys be as foul to Harry once they find out he's a wizard? What's going to happen when a certain house elf appears? And will Harry and Tonks ever figure out just what the deal with Leon is?

I'm not telling.

See you in the Chamber. Mwahahahahaha!

Post-edit edit: Thank god, I think I've fixed all of PSR's formatting problems finally. Always edit things yourself, kids. Less hassle in the long run. Thanks for putting up with it all this time. Sorry my lazy butt didn't fix it sooner!